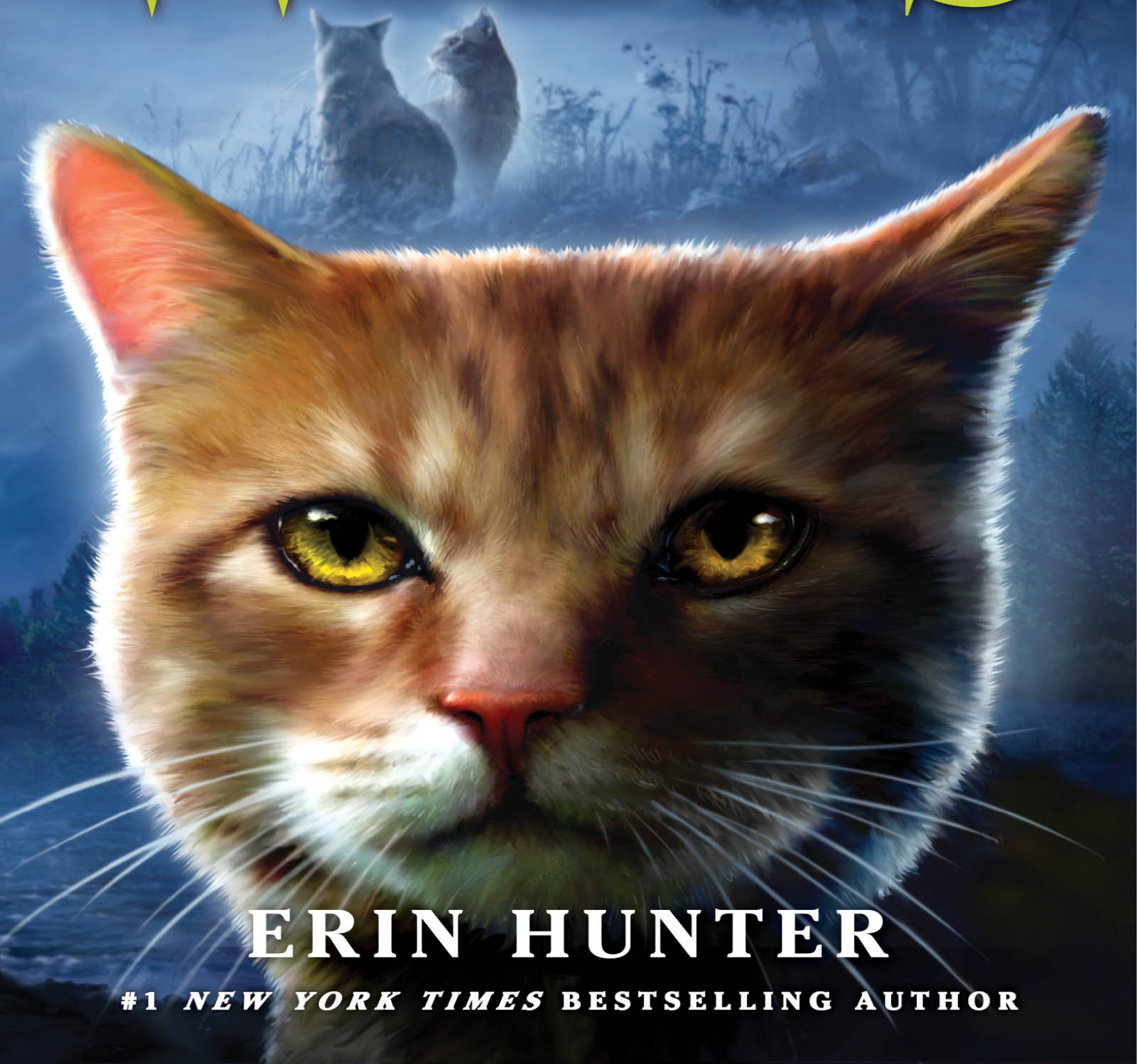
CHANGING SKIES

WARRIORS

THE ELDERS' QUEST



ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHANGING SKIES

WARRIORS

THE ELDERS' QUEST

ERIN HUNTER

HARPER
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

To Roberta

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

SQUIRRELSTAR—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

DEPUTY

IVYPOOL—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

MEDICINE CATS

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

ALDERHEART—dark ginger tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

BAYSHINE—golden tabby tom

BRISTLECLAW—orange-and-white tabby she-cat

POPPYFROST—pale tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

LILYHEART—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes

NIGHTHEART—black tom

WAFFLEPELT—gray-and-brown tom

BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes

CHERRYFALL—ginger she-cat

MOLEWHISKER—brown-and-cream tom

STEMTAIL—orange tabby tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

FINCHLIGHT—tortoiseshell she-cat

GRAYWHISKER—white tom with gray spots

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with petal-shaped white patches

EAGLEWING—ginger she-cat

DEWNOSE—gray-and-white tom

STORMCLOUD—gray tabby tom

HOLLYTUFT—black she-cat

FERNSONG—yellow tabby tom

HONEYFUR—white she-cat with yellow splotches

SPARKPELT—orange tabby she-cat

SORRELSTRIPE—dark brown she-cat

TWIGBRANCH—gray she-cat with green eyes

FINLEAP—brown tom

SHELLFUR—tortoiseshell tom

FERNSTRIPE—gray tabby she-cat

PLUMSTONE—black-and-ginger she-cat

FLIPCLAW—brown tabby tom

LEAFSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

SPOTFUR—spotted tabby she-cat

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

SUNBEAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat (mother of Goldenkit, a golden tabby tom, and Shinekit, a black she-kit)

THRIFTEAR—dark gray she-cat (mother of Moonkit, a she-kit whose face is split between black and orange tabby)

MYRTLEBLOOM—pale brown she-cat (mother of Oakkit, a a pale brown tabby she-kit with white spots; Sunkit, an orange tabby tom; and Hazelkit, a tortoiseshell she-kit with white spots)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches

BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER	**TIGERSTAR**—dark brown tabby tom
DEPUTY	**CLOVERFOOT**—gray tabby she-cat
MEDICINE CATS	**PUDDLESHINE**—brown tom with white splotches **SHADOWSIGHT**—gray tabby tom
WARRIORS	**TAWNYPELT**—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes **STONEWING**—white tom **SCORCHFUR**—dark gray tom with slashed ears **FLAXFOOT**—brown tabby tom **DOVEWING**—pale gray she-cat with green eyes **CINNAMONTAIL**—brown tabby she-cat with white paws **SNOWBIRD**—pure white she-cat with green eyes **YARROWLEAF**—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes **GRASSHEART**—pale brown tabby she-cat **WHORLPELT**—gray-and-white tom **HOPWHISKER**—calico she-cat **BLAZEFIRE**—white-and-ginger tom **FLOWERSTEM**—silver she-cat **SNAKETOOTH**—honey-colored tabby she-cat **APPRENTICE, REDPAW** (reddish brown tom) **SLATEFUR**—sleek gray tom **POUNCESTEP**—gray tabby she-cat **GULLSWOOP**—white she-cat **SPIRECLAW**—black-and-white tom **FRINGEWHISKER**—white she-cat with brown splotches **APPRENTICE, SPRUCEPAW** (silver tabby and white she-cat) **BIRCHFEATHER**—light brown tom **BLOOMPETAL**—black she-cat **FIRBARK**—brown tabby tom **WHISPERBREEZE**—gray tom **STREAMRIPPLE**—gray tabby she-cat
QUEENS	**LIGHTLEAP**—brown tabby she-cat (mother to Quickkit, a ginger tabby tom; Beechkit, a pale brown tom; and Poolkit, a white she-kit)

ELDERS — **OAKFUR**—small brown tom

SKYCLAN

LEADER — **LEAFSTAR**—brown-and-cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY — **HAWKWING**—dark gray tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CATS — **FRECKLEWISH**—mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs

FIDGETFLAKE—black-and-white tom

MEDIATOR — **TREE**—yellow tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS — **MACGYVER**—black-and-white tom

DEWSPRING—sturdy gray tom

ROOTSPRING—yellow tom

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

SAGENOSE—pale gray tom

KITESCRATCH—reddish-brown tom

HARRYBROOK—gray tom

CLOUDMIST—white she-cat with yellow eyes

TURTLECRAWL—tortoiseshell she-cat

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

WRENFLIGHT—golden tabby she-cat

REEDCLAW—small pale tabby she-cat

BEETLESHINE—white-and-black tabby tom

MINTFUR—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

NETTLESPLASH—pale brown tom

TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat

PALESKY—black-and-white she-cat

VIOLETSHINE—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

BELLALEAF—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

QUAILFEATHER—white tom with crow-black ears

PIGEONFOOT—gray-and-white she-cat

GRAVELNOSE—tan tom

SUNNYPELT—ginger she-cat

BEESTING—white-and-tabby she-cat

NECTARSONG—brown she-cat

BLOSSOMHEART—ginger-and-white she-cat

DUSKSHINE—white tom with brown paws and ears

RIDGEGLOW—reddish she-cat with a white nose

QUEENS

NEEDLECLAW—black-and-white she-cat (mother to Robinkit, a reddish-brown she-kit, and Starlingkit, a black-and-white tom)

ELDERS

FALLOWFERN—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

SPARROWPELT—dark brown tabby tom

CHERRYTAIL—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

WINDCLAN

LEADER

HARESTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELFLIGHT—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

WHISTLEBREEZE—gray tabby she-cat

WARRIORS

BRINDLEWING—mottled brown she-cat

FEATHERPELT—gray tabby she-cat

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

WOODSONG—brown she-cat

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

LEAFCURL—white she-cat with gray spots

CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom

GRASSFUR—auburn she-cat

BRANCHLEAP—white tom

SONGLEAP—tortoiseshell she-cat

APPRENTICE, SILKYPAW (long-haired gray tom)

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

FLUTTERFOOT—brown-and-white tom

SLIGHTFOOT—black tom with white flash on his chest

OATCLAW—pale brown tabby tom

HOOTWHISKER—dark gray tom

APPRENTICE, FLUFFPAW (fluffy pale brown tom)

LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat

BROOKRIPPLE—black-and-white tom

STRIPEHEART—gray tabby tom

QUEENS

APPLESHINE—yellow tabby she-cat (mother to Rustlekit, a white tom with a brown tail, and Stretchkit, a brown tabby she-cat with white face markings)

ELDERS

WHISKERNOSE—light brown tom

NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

ICESTAR—white she-cat with blue eyes

DEPUTY

OWLNOSE—brown tabby tom

MEDICINE CATS

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat

FROSTDAWN—light gray she-cat with blue eyes

WARRIORS

DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat

MINNOWTAIL—dark gray-and-white she-cat

HAVENPELT—black-and-white she-cat

TROUTSHINE—brown-and-white spotted tom

MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom

RAPIDSPLASH—gray-and-white she-cat

PODLIGHT—gray-and-white tom

SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat

LIZARDTAIL—light brown tom

SNEEZECLOUD—gray-and-white tom

BRACKENPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat

MISTPOOL—tortoiseshell-and-white tabby she-cat

HOLLOWSPRING—black tom

GORSECLAW—white tom with gray ears

SPARROWTAIL—large brown tabby tom

NIGHTSKY—dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

GRAYSKY—silver tabby tom

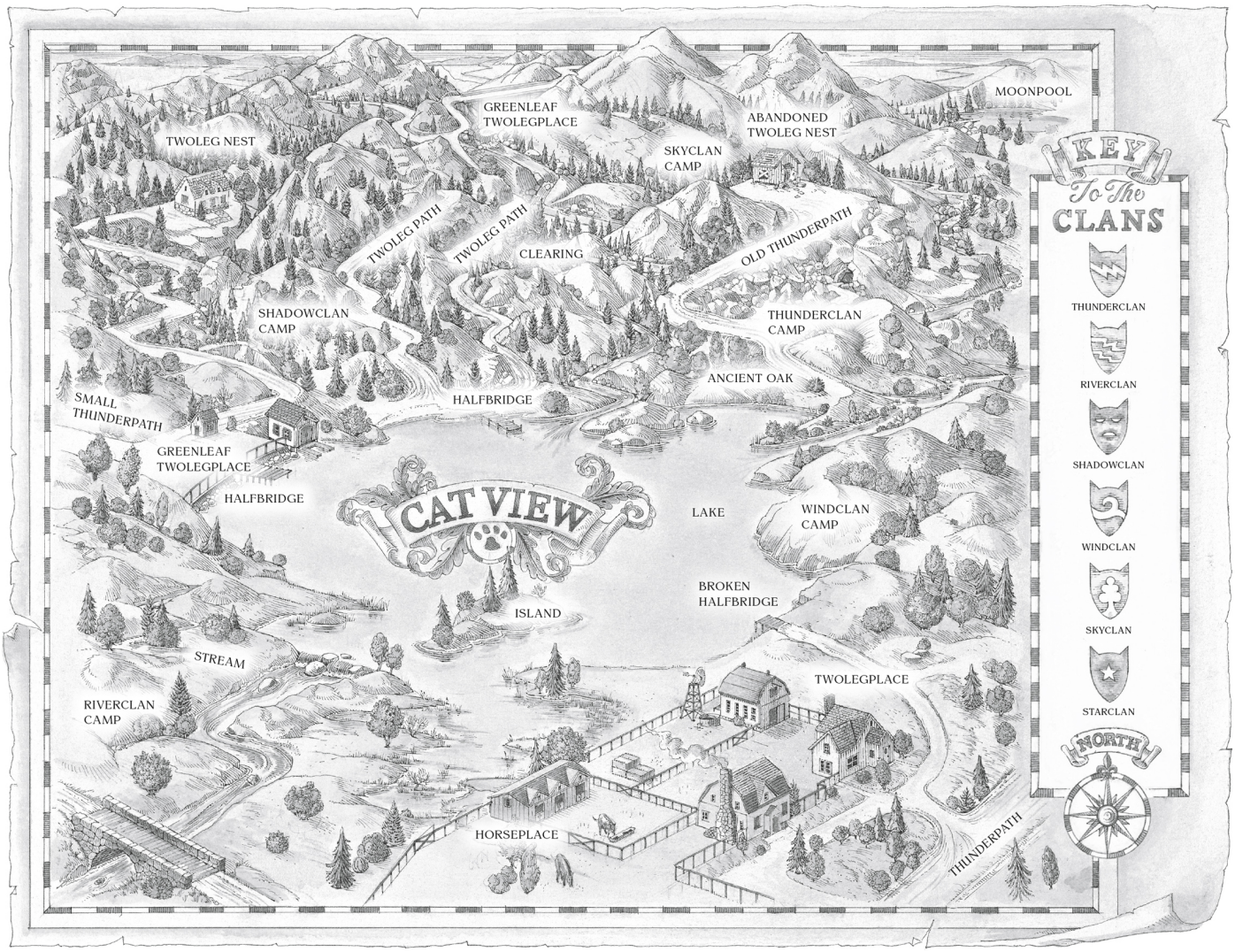
QUEENS

FLOATSHIMMER—black she-cat (mother to Heronkit, a silver she-kit, and Eelkit, a black tom)

ELDERS

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Maps


CAT VIEW
TWOLEG NEST
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
ABANDONED TWOLEG NEST
MOONPOOL
SKYCLAN CAMP
TWOLEG PATH
TWOLEG PATH
CLEARING
OLD THUNDERPATH
SHADOWCLAN CAMP
THUNDERCLAN CAMP
ANCIENT OAK
HALFBRIDGE
SMALL THUNDERPATH
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
HALFBRIDGE
LAKE
WINDCLAN CAMP
BROKEN HALFBRIDGE
ISLAND
STREAM
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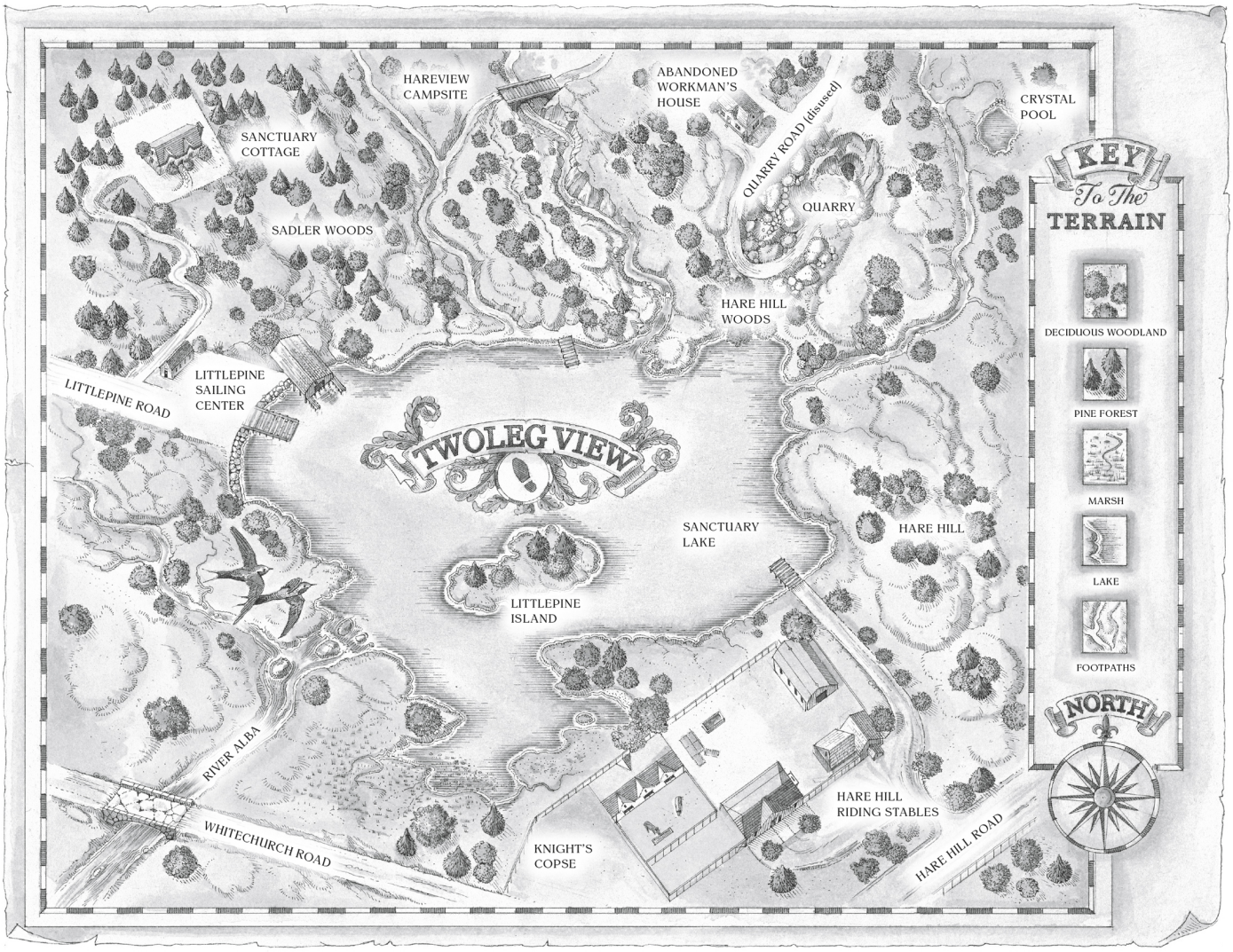
HORSEPLACE
THUNDERPATH
KEY To The CLANS
THUNDERCLAN
RIVERCLAN
SHADOWCLAN
WINDCLAN
SKYCLAN
STARCLAN
NORTH


TWOLEG VIEW
HAREVIEW CAMPSITE
ABANDONED WORKMAN'S HOUSE
CRYSTAL POOL
SANCTUARY COTTAGE
QUARRY ROAD (disused)
QUARRY
SADLER WOODS
HARE HILL WOODS
LITTLEPINE SAILING CENTER
LITTLEPINE ROAD
SANCTUARY LAKE
HARE HILL
LITTLEPINE ISLAND
RIVER ALBA
WHITECHURCH ROAD
KNIGHT'S COPSE
HARE HILL RIDING STABLES
HARE HILL ROAD
KEY To The TERRAIN
DECIDUOUS WOODLAND
PINE FOREST
MARSH
LAKE
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Prologue

Warm sunlight trickled through the branches, casting dappled leaf shadows on the woodland floor below. Everything was still; not even a breeze stirred the foliage or ruffled the surface of the pool in the center of the clearing. The cats who sat around the water's edge might have been carved out of stone, the only movement the glitter of stars in their fur.

Under their unblinking gaze, a tiny image of the lake territories had appeared, with cats going purposefully about their warrior duties: patrolling their borders, hunting, practicing their battle moves. They were unaware that the spirits of their ancestors were watching them.

Among the StarClan cats, a tabby-and-white she-cat was the first to stir, letting out a long sigh and stretching out a paw to drag it through the water. The ripples broke up the image, and as they calmed, they left nothing but the reflection of the branches overhead. When the surface was still again, the she-cat spoke.

"We *can't* lose contact with the Clans again." Her voice throbbed with distress. "The living cats *need* us."

A gray tom let out a snort of disgust, his piercing blue eyes glaring down into the water. "That's all very well, Leafpool," he muttered. "But change is coming, whether we like it or not. I see a new threat building up like storm clouds on the horizon, and no cat knows how the Clans will react to it."

"But, Skystar—" Leafpool protested.

The first leader of SkyClan interrupted her with a raised paw. "The Clans were unstable in my time, and if you ask me, they're just as bad now."

With a sweep of her plumy tail, a blue-gray she-cat rose to her paws. "I'm sure that every cat will meet the challenge," she declared. "The Clans have faced obstacles before, and they have always triumphed."

"Not without losses, Mistystar," Skystar growled.

The former RiverClan leader inclined her head. "Not without losses," she admitted.

"The Clans should be warned," Leafpool continued, sounding more decisive now. "We must send them a prophecy."

The other cats fell silent, exchanging thoughtful glances; the pause lengthened, full of unspoken words, until eventually they nodded agreement.

"Then who will we send it to?" Mistystar asked.

A small gray-and-white tom sitting at the far side of the pool tilted his head thoughtfully. "Prophecies are usually sent to the medicine cats," he meowed.

"Yes, Runningnose, and the medicine cat then passes the prophecy on to the Clan leader." The speaker was a handsome black-and-white tom with his long tail wrapped

around his paws. “This time we can’t afford to delay. Why not send the prophecy directly to the leader?”

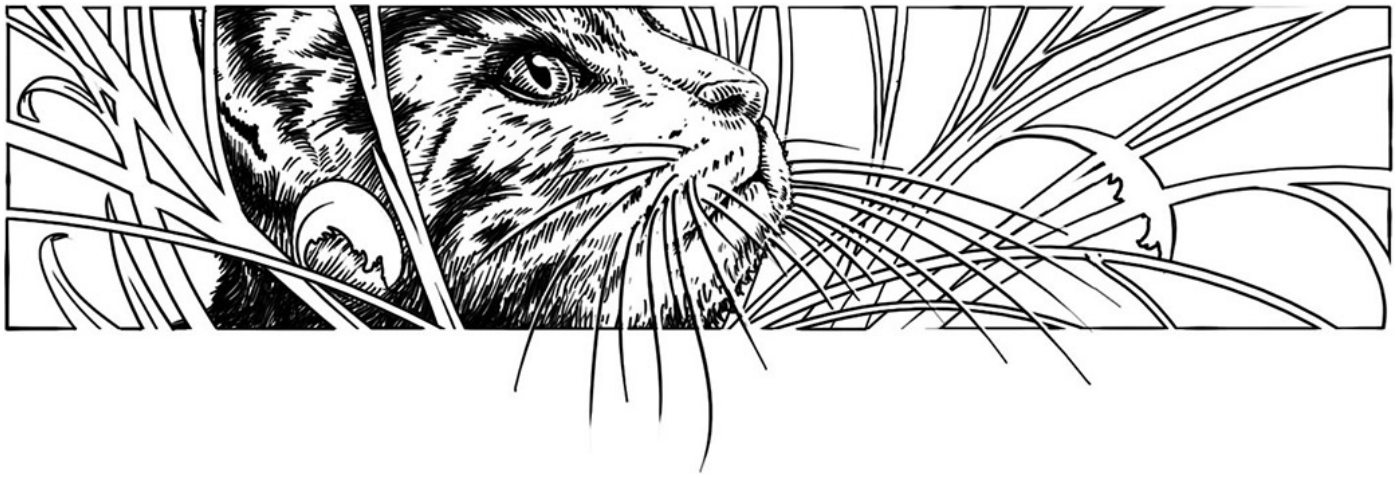
“Tallstar has a point,” Skystar commented.

“Maybe an older cat,” the former WindClan leader went on. “Some cat who made the Great Journey from the forest to the lake and will understand how urgent this is.”

“But will they really?” Mistystar asked anxiously. “Whoever we choose, will they believe how great the danger is that is hanging over the Clans?”

“And will they be able to make their Clanmates, and the other Clans, believe it?” Leafpool added. She turned to one cat who so far had not spoken. “What do you think, Firestar?”

The flame-colored tom sat with lowered head, gazing down into the water. “We may have to do something we have never done before,” he murmured. Then, looking up, he spoke more clearly. “I think I know a cat with the wisdom to lead the Clans on this journey. . . .”



Chapter 1

Sunhigh was not far off, but the pale rays of the leaf-fall sun had not yet banished the chill from the forest. As Tawnypelt emerged from the ShadowClan camp, she fluffed out her tortoiseshell fur and raised her muzzle to sniff the air.

"Great StarClan, it's cold!" Spireclaw muttered. He had followed Tawnypelt out of the camp and halted at her shoulder. "And leaf-bare hasn't even begun. What will it be like in another moon?"

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Tawnypelt told him briskly. "For now there should still be plenty of prey around."

By now the rest of the hunting patrol—Whorlpelt and Bloompetal—had appeared. Beckoning with her tail for them to follow, Tawnypelt set out. Where the dark pines cast their shadows, frost still edged the grasses, and the ground felt like stone beneath her pads.

"Where are we going?" Whorlpelt asked.

"I thought we would try the boggy place just this side of the little Thunderpath," Tawnypelt replied. "There should be a few juicy frogs there, to feed the Clan."

"Yuck! I hate it down there," Bloompetal exclaimed. "We'll get our paws all muddy."

Are you a kittypet or a warrior? Tawnypelt bit back the harsh words. The young black she-cat had only recently received her warrior name, and she was still adjusting to her new duties.

"We'll be lucky if muddy paws are all we have to worry about," Tawnypelt responded, deliberately making her voice mild as she glanced back over her shoulder. "Anyway, the ground is hard. It won't be so bad."

"I still think we should go the other way, near the Twoleg den on the edge of the territory," Spireclaw meowed. "That's a really good place for birds."

"Yeah, let's do that," Bloompetal agreed enthusiastically. "I'm great at catching birds. I caught a sparrow yesterday."

Sure you did, after Pouncestep practically hurled it into your claws.

"Then let's go!" Spireclaw's tone was eager, and he veered around as if heading toward the Twoleg den.

Tawnypelt felt the fur on her shoulders begin to bristle. She halted and turned to face the other cats. "Who is leading this patrol, you or me?" she demanded.

"You are, Tawnypelt," Spireclaw responded instantly. "Sorry."

Tawnypelt gave him a brusque nod and was turning away when she spotted Bloompetal rolling her eyes. "Did you have something to say to me, Bloompetal?" she asked.

Bloompetal studied her paws. "No," she muttered.

“Then keep your opinions to yourself,” Tawnypelt hissed. *I am so done with being nice!* “Do I have to send you back to camp on tick duty?”

“No, Tawnypelt.”

“Then let’s get on with it.”

Great StarClan, when did new warriors stop showing respect to us seniors? Tawnypelt wondered with an irritated shake of her pelt. *It was never like this when I was young!*

She led her patrol in silence until they reached the edge of the marshy ground. Reeds and long grasses stretched ahead of them as far as the lake, dry and shrunken now with the early frost. Tiny streams meandered among tussocks of grass, widening out here and there into shallow pools edged with a thin covering of ice.

At first as she gazed out across the marsh, Tawnypelt couldn’t see any sign of prey. But soon flickers of movement showed her where the frogs were lurking, their greenish-brown skins hardly visible against the boggy ground.

“We’re going to fan out,” she began. “Whorlpelt, go in that direction, and Spireclaw, you go that way.” She showed the direction by waving her tail. “Start driving the frogs toward me and Bloompetal so we can pick them off.”

“Shouldn’t we all start moving in on them?” Spireclaw suggested. “Like, trap them in the middle of a circle?”

“I vote we do that,” Bloompetal agreed. “I’m so cold, standing here waiting!”

“I don’t recall asking for a vote.” Tawnypelt tried to put all the frost of the chilly day into her tone. “But okay, Bloompetal, you can stalk if you don’t want to stand around. Whorlpelt, you stay with me.”

The two young cats set off in the directions Tawnypelt had indicated, while she and Whorlpelt waited, crouching behind a clump of reeds.

“Do you remember how Nightheart caught frogs?” Whorlpelt asked after a while. “That day he was being tested to become a ShadowClan cat.”

Tawnypelt stifled a snort of laughter. “Yes, laying a trail of flies to trap the frogs in a deep hole. It worked, too.” She tucked her paws farther underneath her in an effort to keep them warm. “It’s a pity it’s too cold for flies today, or we could try it.”

Whorlpelt murmured agreement. “Those two are certainly taking their time,” he mewed. “There should be frogs coming our way by now.”

The gray-and-white tom was right, Tawnypelt realized. She could still spot movement from frogs deeper in the marsh, but they didn’t seem aware of any danger creeping up on them.

Finally a single frog hopped into range. Whorlpelt flashed out a paw and struck it a killing blow. “Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” he sighed. “But where are all your brothers and sisters?”

Tawnypelt could feel her muscles cramping from the cold, and her annoyance rising with every moment that passed. It was obvious that Spireclaw and Bloompetal hadn’t

done what they were supposed to. “I’ve had enough of this,” she declared, rising to her paws. “I’m going to see what they’re up to.”

Whorlpelt nodded. “Okay. I’ll stay here and see what I can catch.”

Tawnypelt headed around the edge of the marsh in the direction she had sent Spireclaw. But before she had gone many fox-lengths, she spotted the black-and-white tom heading toward her, with Bloompetal just behind him.

“What do you think—” Tawnypelt began, then broke off and halted in amazement. The jaws of the two young cats were full of frogs; Spireclaw had three, and Bloompetal was carrying two.

Bloompetal bounded up to Tawnypelt and dropped her prey at the senior warrior’s paws. “Spireclaw showed me a really good trick! He told me to run around the frogs in a circle and make the circle smaller and smaller, so when the frogs tried to leap away, he could grab them. It was fun!”

Spireclaw had obviously caught Tawnypelt’s grim look. “We thought you would be pleased,” he meowed in a small voice.

Tawnypelt took a deep breath. The two young cats had done well; this wasn’t the time to start scolding them. “I am pleased,” she responded. “That’s a great catch. But next time, let the leader of your patrol know what you’re doing. Whorlpelt and I have been freezing our tails off back there.”

“Sorry,” Spireclaw muttered.

“Okay, then, scoop up your prey and we’ll head back to camp.” Beckoning with her tail, Tawnypelt turned to lead the way back to where Whorlpelt was waiting. As she moved, she spotted Spireclaw and Bloompetal exchanging a happy, proud look.

They got a bit of praise, and not much scolding, she sighed inwardly. *But have they learned anything?*

The gray-and-white tom sprang to his paws and joined the others, carrying his single piece of fresh-kill. “I’m impressed,” he murmured, nodding toward the two younger cats, laden with prey.

“I’m *frustrated*,” Tawnypelt hissed in reply. “They don’t listen to a single word I’ve told them, and they *still* stroll up with their jaws full. I tell you, Whorlpelt, I’ve just about had it with these young cats!”

Whorlpelt shrugged, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “Tawnypelt, you should know by now what young cats are like.”

Tawnypelt’s only response was a growl. She felt even worse because she hadn’t managed to catch a single frog.

As she made her way back to camp at the head of her patrol, Tawnypelt felt a hot weight of anger and loss growing in her belly. *Why are all the ShadowClan cats so young?* she asked herself. *There’s not a single warrior my age left alive.*

Thinking back on the warriors she’d known and lost over the seasons of her life, she laid their deaths at the paws of her father, the first Tigerstar; of Darktail; of Sol; of the impostor, Ashfur, who had deceived so many cats.

I still feel strong, she reflected. *I have many seasons left to serve my Clan. But sometimes these young cats look at me like I belong in the elders' den.*

Back in the camp, Tawnypelt tried to feel satisfaction as her Clanmates dropped their prey on the fresh-kill pile. After all, they had caught a decent amount; it would go a long way toward feeding the Clan today.

Glancing around the clearing, she felt the weight in her belly begin to dissolve as she spotted Lightleap and Blazefire curled up together at the entrance to the nursery.

"Are the kits inside?" she asked, hurrying over to them. "Can I have a peep?"

"You could, if they were here," Lightleap purred. "But they're with Oakfur."

"Again," Blazefire added with a *mrrow* of laughter, waving his tail toward the elders' den. "They love his stories."

"I'll go and visit," Tawnypelt mewed.

Before heading for the elders' den, Tawnypelt darted over to the fresh-kill pile and snatched up a thrush: prey that she knew was Oakfur's favorite. Then she trotted across the camp and slid under the low-growing pine branches that sheltered the den.

". . . and when we came over the hill, we saw the lake and all the Clan territories lying in front of us," Oakfur was meowing. "And then we knew that we had found our new home."

He's telling them about the Great Journey, Tawnypelt thought.

Oakfur had mentored Tawnypelt herself and her son Tigerstar; she remembered her time learning from him with respect and warm affection. Now Oakfur was one of the oldest cats in all the Clans. He had been born in the old forest, and he remembered the time when Nightstar had been the leader of ShadowClan. So much of their Clan's story had taken place under his watchful gaze, and now he was passing on his wisdom to the youngest members.

At first no cat noticed Tawnypelt as she entered the den. The kits were rapt, concentrating on Oakfur's story, and the old brown tom seemed to be looking into the distance, as if he could still see the Clans as they poured over the brow of the hill and headed down to claim their territories by the lake.

Then, as Oakfur finished speaking, he looked up. "Is that thrush for me, Tawnypelt?" he purred.

Before Tawnypelt could reply, all three kits spun around and hurled themselves at her, letting out squeaks of excitement. Tawnypelt staggered and slid to one side, losing her grip on the thrush.

"Have you been hunting?" Quickkit asked, his ginger tabby fur bristling in excitement. "Did you catch lots?"

"We want to go hunting," his brother, Beechkit, added. "I'm going to be the best hunter in the Clan!"

"No, I am!" Quickkit leaped on top of his littermate, and the two tom-kits rolled around the den in a writhing knot of ginger and pale brown fur.

Poolkit leaped aside to avoid them, then huddled down on the den floor with her paws tucked under her. “Tawnypelt, look!” she exclaimed. “This is my hunter’s crouch. Sprucepaw showed me how.”

Tawnypelt rescued the thrush and laid it at Oakfur’s paws. “That’s very good,” she told Poolkit. *Actually, it’s not bad, for a kit.* “Now show me how you stalk.”

Quivering with concentration, Poolkit crept up, paw step by paw step, to where her brothers were still wrestling. Then she flung herself on top of them. “Got you!” she squealed. “Got both of you! Two rabbits to feed the Clan!”

Tawnypelt exchanged an amused glance with Oakfur. Sometimes it amazed her to think that these were the kits of her son’s daughter. In spite of all the cats who had been lost, the family she had created with Rowanclaw still continued. Her chest swelled with pride as she watched and saw how active and inquisitive they were.

Poolkit rolled off her brothers and sat up, beginning to wash her paws with a thoughtful look on her face. Even though she played with the others, Tawnypelt reflected, she was the quietest of the three. She reminded Tawnypelt so much of her own daughter, Dawnpelt, who had died at Darktail’s paws.

“Is something wrong?” she asked Poolkit.

The young she-cat gave her paw one last lick and drew it over her misty white shoulder fur. “I’m confused about one of Oakfur’s stories,” she mewed. “When he was telling us about our ancestor Rowanclaw, he called him Rowanstar, but that isn’t right, is it?”

Oakfur had a mouthful of thrush, so it was Tawnypelt who replied. “No, that’s right. Rowanclaw was the leader of ShadowClan, so he was Rowanstar then. After Darktail and his Kin ripped ShadowClan apart, Rowanclaw swallowed his pride and gave up being leader. He gave the rest of his nine lives back to StarClan, and he joined our Clan to SkyClan.”

“But we’re not part of SkyClan now!” Quickkit exclaimed. He and Beechkit broke apart and sat up, their eyes wide with indignation.

“Why did Rowanclaw do that?” Beechkit asked. “He betrayed ShadowClan!”

Tawnypelt shook her head, her chest cramping from the pain of the memory, so that for a moment she couldn’t speak. “No, it was the right thing to do at that time,” she meowed at last. “Rowanclaw knew that Tigerstar would return and make ShadowClan strong once more. He kept the last few warriors safe until ShadowClan could revive.”

Oakfur swallowed his bite of prey. “But he never lived to see it,” he murmured.

“No, he died saving Hopwhisker and Flaxfoot, back when they were just kits,” Tawnypelt told the kits.

“He fought like a Clan leader,” Oakfur added.

The kits’ indignation had faded; now they looked up at Oakfur, wide-eyed and impressed.

“Then that’s a whole new story!” Quickkit bounced up to the elder and crouched down at his paws. “Tell it to us!”

“Yes, tell us!” Beechkit begged.

Poolkit held back for a moment as her brothers crowded up to Oakfur. “Rowanclaw must have been a mighty warrior,” she mewed seriously, gazing up at Tawnypelt.

Tawnypelt felt as though a tough bit of crow-food were lodged in her throat. A few heartbeats passed before she could reply. “He was my mate. And he truly was a mighty warrior.”

Oh, Rowanclaw, she thought, looking down at the kits’ bright faces. *How you would have loved to be here today.*

Chapter 2

Sunlight poured down into the gorge, bouncing off the reddish rocks of the cliff face and soaking into Leafstar's fur where she lay on a warm, flat stone at the edge of the river. Her mate, Billystorm, lay stretched out beside her, lazily nibbling at the rabbit he and Leafstar had caught earlier.

The rest of her Clanmates were sunning themselves too, drowsing or sharing tongues after a morning's successful hunt. Leafstar could see her three kits, Firefern, Stormheart, and Harrybrook, grooming themselves after sharing a squirrel. A strange pang pierced her heart as she looked at them, but she couldn't remember why.

"I learned that move quicker than you!"

"Did not! You couldn't catch a mouse if it ran into your jaws."

At the sound of quarrelling voices, Leafstar raised her head and looked around until she spotted two of the Clan's apprentices, Hawkpaw and Duskpaw, glaring at each other near the bottom of the cliff. She suppressed a sigh. The two young toms were good friends as well as littermates, so why they had to give in to this bickering all the time . . .

"That's enough!" Leafstar mewed sharply. "Go find your mentors for some training. You obviously have some energy to burn off."

As she spoke, the apprentices spun around to face her, shocked that the Clan leader had heard their argument. Hawkpaw ducked his head. "Sorry," he muttered. Then both young cats scampered off in search of their mentors.

Before Leafstar could lie down again, she saw Echosong, the SkyClan medicine cat, emerging from her den at the foot of the cliff. She padded over to Leafstar and Billystorm, dipping her head in respect.

"It's time," she meowed. For some reason her voice sounded unnaturally deep, as if it were the voice of another cat.

With a nod of thanks, Leafstar rose to her paws and began to climb the cliff until she reached the gap that separated the main camp from the Skyrock. Bunching her muscles, she leaped across, ready to call her Clan.

"It's time."

The voice came again; this time Leafstar opened her eyes to see the outline of a cat standing over her. "Uh . . . okay, Sharpclaw, I'm coming."

Then, as she shook off the last shreds of her dream, Leafstar realized that the cat who had spoken wasn't Sharpclaw, her deputy when SkyClan was first formed in the gorge. He was Hawkwing, Sharpclaw's son, and she was in her den in SkyClan's camp beside the lake.

I'll never see the gorge again. Or Billystorm, or Firefern and Stormheart . . . Of Leafstar's family, only her son Harrybrook remained. *So much death* . . .

“Sorry, Hawkwing.” Leafstar squinted at her deputy, his face blurred and indistinct in the dim light of the den. Anxiety tore at her as if she had leaped into a bramble thicket. Her vision had been growing worse for some moons, making it hard for her to recognize her Clanmates by sight. So far she had managed to keep the problem a secret, except from her medicine cats, but she wondered how long it would be before it was obvious to the rest of the Clan.

“It’s time for the ceremony,” Hawkwing repeated. His voice was patient, and Leafstar wondered how much he knew, or had guessed.

“Thanks, Hawkwing. I’m almost ready.”

Rising to her paws, Leafstar shook off the scraps of moss and bracken from her nest and gave herself a quick grooming. Then, when she was satisfied that she looked as neat as a Clan leader should, she padded out into the open. The extra light made her vision clearer, and she knew every paw step of the camp, so it was easy for her to leap onto the massive boulder from where she addressed the Clan.

“Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Tallrock for a Clan meeting!” she yowled.

Several of the Clan were already out in the clearing; as they drew closer to the boulder, Leafstar managed to make out each one: the Clan’s mediator, Tree, and his son, Rootspring, their yellow pelts unmistakable; Sagenose and his sister, Mintfur, close enough for their scent to waft over her; Sunnypelt, easy to identify from her purposeful stride, and the smaller cat with her had the distinctive white markings of Beesting. All of them sat in a rough semicircle in front of the Tallrock, while Fidgetflake and Frecklewish emerged from the medicine cats’ den and padded over to join them. Littermates Nectarsong and Gravelnose, returning from their patrol, pushed through the outer line of bushes into the camp and hurried across to sit side by side.

Meanwhile, Leafstar spotted Needleclaw bustling out of the nursery, herding her two kits, Robinkit and Starlingkit, in front of her. Kitescratch, the kits’ father, followed them out, his head held high and his chest puffed out with pride.

“Just look at you!” Needleclaw exclaimed. “Starlingkit, I groomed you moments ago! Have you been rolling in moss?”

Starlingkit wriggled uncomfortably as his mother covered him with fierce licks until his black pelt gleamed and his white chest fur shone like snow in sunlight.

Meanwhile Robinkit was grooming her reddish-brown fur by herself. “*I’m* ready,” she announced with a smug look at her brother.

Kitescratch lifted something—a spray of bracken, Leafstar guessed—off the back of her neck. “You are now,” he purred.

“Come closer!” Leafstar called. Warm satisfaction soaked deep into her body, and her worries melted away like frost in the morning. It was good to see such lively and vigorous kits, and to set their paws on the path they would follow in their Clan.

Waving her tail, she beckoned Starlingkit to approach the foot of the Tallrock; he bounced up enthusiastically and stood there quivering and purring with excitement. The

rest of the Clan grew silent as Leafstar began to speak.

"This is a great day for SkyClan," she began. "The making of new apprentices means that our Clan will grow stronger and survive into the future. Starlingkit, from this moment on you will be known as Starlingpaw."

She let her gaze travel around the circle of cats; she had already decided who should mentor the two apprentices, and distinguished the brown pelt of the cat she had chosen for Starlingpaw.

"Nectarsong, you are ready for an apprentice," she announced. "You have shown intelligence and loyalty to your Clan, and I'm sure you will pass those qualities on to Starlingpaw."

Leafstar heard Nectarsong exclaim, "Me? Wonderful!" as Starlingpaw scurried across the circle and stretched up to touch noses with her.

"Starlingpaw! Starlingpaw!" the Clan yowled in acclamation, while Starlingpaw stood beside his mentor, looking as though every hair on his pelt were bristling with pride.

Leafstar gave them a moment, then raised her tail for silence and beckoned Robinkit to the foot of the rock. "From now on, you will be known as Robinpaw," she meowed. "Gravelnose, you, too, are ready to be a mentor. No cat can doubt your courage and your determination, and I know you will pass those qualities on to your apprentice."

Robinpaw wasn't as obviously excited as her brother had been, but she held herself straight as Leafstar spoke the words that made her an apprentice, and dipped her head respectfully before bounding over to the tan-colored tom who would be her mentor.

Gravelnose bent down to touch noses with her. "We'll do great things together," he promised.

"Robinpaw! Robinpaw!"

Leafstar watched contentedly as her Clan yowled their welcome to the young she-cat. She saw Gravelnose and Nectarsong exchanging glances and guessed how thrilled they must be feeling from their loud purrs; neither of them had been mentors before, and as littermates, they must be extra happy to have been chosen together. Leafstar was sure that they would take their task very seriously.

Needleclaw and Kitescratch bounded over to congratulate their kits, purring and licking their ears affectionately. "Listen to your mentors, and let's not have any silly behavior," Kitescratch warned the new apprentices.

Leafstar couldn't repress a *mrrow* of amusement. Silly behavior was pretty common with apprentices, as Kitescratch himself should remember well.

A moment later the group broke up; Nectarsong and Gravelnose headed out of the camp, followed by their apprentices. The two young cats held their heads and tails high.

They'll be off for their tour of the territory, Leafstar thought. *Beginning a lifetime of learning and service to their Clan.* She sighed happily as she watched the rest of the Clan going about their duties. *SkyClan is safe.*

“Leafstar, there’s something I have to show you.”

Sunhigh was just past. Leafstar had been dozing at the entrance to her den in the split at the bottom of the Tallrock, listening to the subdued sounds of the camp and the twittering of birds in the trees that surrounded the clearing. She could hear a distant roaring, too, coming from beyond the top border of the territory. It had been going on for almost half a moon, and no cat knew what was causing the disturbance.

I’d bet a moon of dawn patrols that Twolegs are to blame for it.

Now Frecklewish’s voice interrupted her musings, and she sat up, shaking her head to wake herself thoroughly. Her medicine cat was standing in front of her, close enough for Leafstar to see the trouble in her face.

“What’s the matter?” Leafstar asked.

“Follow me.” Frecklewish turned and led the way beneath the dogwood that screened the medicine cats’ den, in a shallow dip in the ground.

Mystified, Leafstar followed. The harsh smell of vomit caught her in the throat as she ducked under the branches, and when she entered the den, she saw Bellaleaf lying stretched out on her side. Her jaws were gaping, and her breath came in harsh gasps.

Beyond her, Fidgetflake was gathering a bundle of leaves and moss, streaked with vomit, ready to carry it away.

“How long has she been like this?” Leafstar asked. Bile rose in her own throat as she gazed, horrified, at her sick Clanmate. It was an effort to keep her voice from shaking.

“She came in just after the apprentice ceremony,” Frecklewish replied. “She was crying in pain from bellyache, and I gave her yarrow to make her vomit. That helped with the pain, but she—”

The medicine cat broke off as all of Bellaleaf’s limbs began to jerk and she let out a low-pitched wail of anguish. Several heartbeats passed before she was still again, panting and moaning in absolute exhaustion.

“She keeps having those seizures,” Frecklewish went on. “They’re wearing her out. I made her eat a juniper berry, but it didn’t help. I think all I can do now is give her a couple of poppy seeds to make her sleep and hope she’s stronger once she’s had some rest.”

Fidgetflake, who had pushed the soiled bedding out of the den, came up with a leaf that Leafstar assumed held the poppy seeds. He crouched down beside Bellaleaf and held the leaf out to her. “Come on, lick these up,” he murmured encouragingly. “You’ll feel better when you’ve rested.”

He stroked Bellaleaf’s head gently with one paw while she licked up the poppy seeds. Gradually her breathing grew quieter, and her eyes closed.

“Thank StarClan, at least that worked,” Frecklewish mewed.

“But what is causing it?” Leafstar asked. “Bellaleaf is a senior warrior. She knows not to go around eating crow-food or deathberries.”

Frecklewish shook her head. “I’d guess that she must have eaten *something*, but don’t ask me what. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Her eyes are pink and swollen, too,” Fidgetflake added.

Leafstar couldn’t take her eyes off the pale orange she-cat, lying so limp and silent, with the reek of vomit still clinging to her fur. “You must be right that she ate something bad,” she began. “And we need to find out what. Suppose other cats—”

She broke off at the sound of some cat pushing their way through the branches behind her. She turned to see Sagenose.

“Frecklewish, I’ve got the most awful bellyache!” he burst out, scarcely noticing that his Clan leader was standing there. “Can you give me something for it?”

Leafstar couldn’t suppress a gasp of dismay. Sagenose—another senior warrior who should know better than to eat anything he wasn’t sure about—seemed unsteady on his paws, and he had the same pinkish tinge as Bellaleaf around his eyes, the vibrant color standing out against his pale gray fur.

“Yarrow,” Frecklewish mewed, as Fidgetflake came up with a couple of the leaves in his jaws. “Eat them, and for StarClan’s sake go and be sick outside the camp. Then come back here.”

Sagenose took the leaves with an alarmed glance at Bellaleaf and slid rapidly out of the den.

“How many more?” Leafstar asked, struggling to suppress panic.

“Not many, I hope,” Frecklewish responded. She sounded more purposeful, as if she was beginning to understand. “I think we’re getting somewhere. Leafstar, do you know whether Sagenose and Bellaleaf were out together today?”

Leafstar shook her head. “No, Sagenose did the dawn patrol; Bellaleaf was out hunting.”

“Then there’s only one place where they could both have found something that made them sick.”

For a couple of heartbeats Leafstar didn’t understand what her medicine cat was telling her. “Oh, great StarClan!” she exclaimed at last. “The fresh-kill pile!”

“Let’s take a look,” Frecklewish meowed.

She led the way out into the camp, with Leafstar just behind her and Fidgetflake bringing up the rear. Frecklewish bounded across to the fresh-kill pile and began pawing at it, separating the prey and giving each piece close scrutiny.

Hawkwing, who was sitting close by, chatting with Tree and Cherrytail, sprang to his paws and stared at her. “What’s going on?” he asked, confusion in his voice.

Not replying directly, Frecklewish exclaimed, “Look!” and pointed to a piece of prey she had dragged away from the rest.

Leafstar padded up, peering closely to examine it. The prey—a mouse—looked bony, and its skin seemed loose on its body. Most chilling of all, it had the same red swelling around its eyes as Bellaleaf and Sagenose. A rank odor rose from it.

By now, several cats were approaching to see what was going on, gazing curiously at the scattered pile.

Leafstar spun around to face them. “Stay back!” she commanded. “There’s something wrong here. Something is sickening our prey, and we must get to the bottom of it. No cat should touch any of this prey until Frecklewish gives permission.”

The two medicine cats continued sorting through the pile, separating the poisonous pieces of prey from the ones that still looked and smelled good. Leafstar noticed with a heaviness in her chest that most of the prey had the signs of sickness on it; that pile was much bigger than the pile that was safe to eat.

A few moments later Sagenose padded up; he looked shaky, but he was still on his paws. Leafstar guessed that he hadn’t eaten as much of the contaminated prey as Bellaleaf had. “What’s happening?” he asked, staring wide-eyed at the medicine cats.

Frecklewish turned at the sound of his voice. “Did you eat prey from the pile?” she asked him.

Sagenose nodded. “Yes, after I came back from the dawn patrol.”

“And did it look like this?” Frecklewish pointed with her tail at a nearby vole, scrawny and pink-eyed.

“Yes.” Sagenose’s eyes stretched even wider. “Do you mean that’s what gave me a bellyache?”

“We think so.” It was Fidgetflake who replied. “Didn’t you think it looked a bit weird?”

“Well . . . yeah.” Sagenose shrugged. “But I was starving! Besides, I thought it must be okay if some cat had put it on the pile.”

Leafstar drew a long breath. She couldn’t blame Sagenose. The hunting patrols had brought in the poisoned prey without thinking that it looked different from normal.

“We need to find out why this is happening,” she meowed to Hawkwing. “You and I should have a meeting with the medicine cats and see if we can—oh, great StarClan, what now?”

As she spoke, she spotted a hunting patrol emerging from the bushes into the camp. Squinting her eyes, she managed to identify the separate cats. Turtlecrawl and Tinycloud were both carrying prey; Cloudmist was leaning heavily on Rabbitleap’s shoulder.

All four cats headed across the camp to where Leafstar was standing beside the fresh-kill pile. Rabbitleap gently lowered Cloudmist to the ground; the white she-cat was hunched up as if protecting her belly, and she was close enough for Leafstar to make out the telltale pink swelling around her eyes.

Frecklewish padded up to her and gave her a quick sniff. “Bellyache?” she asked.

“Yes, and it’s so bad,” Cloudmist whimpered. “Please give me something for it.”

“I will, in just a moment,” Frecklewish assured her. “But tell me first—what have you eaten today?”

“Nothing. Not a bite,” Cloudmist replied.

The medicine cat exchanged a puzzled glance with Leafstar. “Are you sure?” she asked the sick she-cat, who had begun writhing on the ground in pain.

“Nothing!” Cloudmist gasped. “I’ve had nothing all day except for a drink from the stream.”

Frecklewish flashed a worried glance at Leafstar, then turned back to Cloudmist. “Okay,” she mewed, “go to my den, and I’ll be there in a moment to give you yarrow. Sagenose, go with her.”

Watching the two sick cats as they staggered across the camp, Leafstar felt cold creeping along her limbs and through her whole body, as if she were turning into a cat made of ice. Sick prey was bad enough, but if there was something wrong with the water in the stream, then it would poison cats and prey alike.

Suddenly conscious of the distant noise, like the roaring of monsters, Leafstar glanced at Hawkwing. She could see her own anxiety reflected in her deputy’s amber eyes.

“Twolegs are doing something up there.” She angled her ears in the direction of the sound. “That noise disturbed us at first, but now, to be honest, I hardly notice it. But suppose that the Twolegs have done something to the stream? What will SkyClan do for fresh-kill if the stream poisons all the nearby prey?”

It was Fidgetflake who replied; he had padded up in time to hear Leafstar’s despairing question. “Look, we’ve separated the prey into the pieces that look sick and the ones that still look healthy,” he mewed, pointing with his tail at the two separate piles. “We could try eating the healthy-looking prey—cautiously, with Frecklewish and me watching.”

“That sounds sensible,” Hawkwing agreed. “I don’t mind giving it a go. I’m strong, and if I get sick, I should be able to withstand it.”

He approached the pile of healthy prey, gave it a deep sniff, and extracted a mouse, crouching down to take a few bites. Every one of the cats standing around had their gaze fixed on him as he rose and took a step back.

“It seems okay so far,” he commented.

While she and the other cats watched, Leafstar realized that her deputy and the rest of the cats were waiting for her to come up with a plan that would help the Clan get through this. It wasn’t easy. With leaf-bare approaching, they would need every bit of prey they could catch, but if some of it—most of it—wasn’t fit to eat . . .

I’ve always tried to make my Clan self-sufficient, she thought, hesitating to speak the words that she knew were inevitable.

“To begin with, we need to hunt as far away from the stream as we can,” she announced. “And farther away from the lake, where our territory opens out. We may be able to find prey that hasn’t drunk from the stream—enough to feed ourselves.”

“Really?” Cherrytail gave her Clan leader a doubtful look. “Even when leaf-bare comes?”

“I don’t know,” Leafstar admitted. “I think I will have to bring up our problems at the next Gathering.”

“Tell other Clans that we’re having difficulties?” Hawkwing asked, his tone stern and disapproving.

“I don’t see that we have any choice,” Leafstar responded. “If the stream is poisoned, and there’s no sign that the Twolegs are going to stop whatever they’re doing, we’ll have to ask the other Clans for help. We can drink from the lake—there’s enough water there to dilute whatever is poisoning the stream—but we’ll need to find another source of prey. Maybe ShadowClan and ThunderClan will agree to let us hunt prey that runs across our border onto their territories. At least for a while.”

“And hedgehogs fly,” Hawkwing muttered.

The rest of the cats seemed pleased with Leafstar’s suggestion, but Leafstar herself shared her deputy’s doubts. On the whole, the Clans had not been generous about sharing prey, and leaf-bare was coming on fast: a terrible time to ask for favors.

“We ought to let ThunderClan and ShadowClan know what’s happening right away,” Tree pointed out. “Sickly prey could easily cross our borders into their territory, and if they found out that the sickness started here and we didn’t tell them—well, they wouldn’t be likely to offer us any help.”

“You’re right, Tree,” Leafstar agreed, thankful for the Clan mediator’s good sense. “Will you go to ShadowClan, please, and take Rootspring with you?”

“I’ll go to ThunderClan, if that’s okay,” Hawkwing volunteered.

“No, I would rather you stay,” Leafstar told him. “I want you here, in case you get sick from eating that mouse.” Glancing around to see who else was close by, she beckoned to Rabbitleap and Tinycloud. “You can go and take the message to Squirrelstar,” she meowed.

When the cats she had chosen were heading out of the camp, Leafstar turned back to Hawkwing. “I have a job for you,” she began. “Find a couple more cats, and then carry all that poisoned prey out of the camp and bury it. Pick it up in your claws, mind you, not your jaws. And when you’ve finished, wash your paws. In the lake, not the stream.”

“Sure, Leafstar.” Hawkwing hurried off to the warriors’ den to find more cats to help.

Heaving a long sigh, Leafstar retreated toward her den, but before she reached it, she heard a cat calling her name; she stiffened at the note of urgency. Turning, she saw that Gravelnose and Nectarsong had returned with their apprentices; it was Gravelnose who had called out. All four cats bounded across the camp to join their leader.

“What’s the matter?” Leafstar asked. The two apprentices were wide-eyed, their fur bristling, their expressions a mixture of fear and excitement. Their mentors, in contrast, both looked grave. “Has something happened?”

“While we were showing our apprentices the territory,” Gravelnose began, “we found traces of a badger set.”

“The soil was fresh,” Nectarsong added. “They must have dug it out in the last day or two. And there was a strong scent of badger.”

“What are we going to do?” Starlingpaw asked, bouncing a little on his paws.

Robinpaw’s whiskers were quivering. “Are we going to fight?”

Leafstar raised her tail to silence them. “There’ll be no fighting until we investigate properly,” she declared.

“But we can’t let them stay there.” The objection came from Hawkwing, who was tottering past on three legs, with the body of a sickly vole snagged on the claws of his fourth paw. “We should attack right away, before they get the chance to settle in.”

“No, Hawkwing,” Leafstar meowed firmly. “First we need to make a careful plan. I’ll think it over.”

Hawkwing dipped his head, but he clearly wasn’t happy as he carried on with his task.

Leafstar took a moment to warn the mentors and their apprentices about the dangers of sickly prey and the poisoned water in the stream. Finally, feeling as if her legs wouldn’t support her, she was able to retreat to her den and sink down into her nest.

The morning, when she had made the two new apprentices and had felt so confident about the future of SkyClan, now seemed like a distant memory. *So many problems: badgers, sickness, Twolegs . . . How can I begin to solve them all?*

She struggled to make a plan, but she was so exhausted that she fell asleep almost instantly. Once again she found herself in the gorge, the sun-drenched rocks rising on either side, light dancing on the surface of the river.

Her deputy, Sharpclaw, was sitting by her side, his ginger fur glowing in the sunlight, his ears sharply pricked and his green eyes glowing intensely. They were discussing something important, but as Leafstar jerked awake again, she couldn’t remember what that was.

I’ve been dreaming so much about the gorge lately.

Her whole body cramped with a fierce pang of homesickness. The colors there had been so vivid, the outlines sharp. Now the world around her was gray and dim, as though spiders had been spinning their webs over her eyes.

Her belly growled, but instead of heading to the fresh-kill pile, she decided to ignore it. Prey could be dangerous right now, and even if the healthy prey was safe, it would be harder to find. So, she decided, she would set an example by eating only once a day. That was her responsibility as leader: to be first in battle and last to the fresh-kill pile in hard times.

With a sigh, she admitted to herself that between the shortage of prey, whatever the Twolegs were up to on their borders, and now badgers, she could use some advice. Frecklewish and Fidgetflake were intelligent, competent medicine cats, and she trusted them absolutely, but Echosong had been her *friend*. In the early days they had built SkyClan together, and she had grieved desperately when Echosong had died on the journey to find the other Clans and their home beside the lake.

Oh, Echosong, I miss you so much! I wish I could talk with you, like we used to.

Then an idea flickered into Leafstar's mind. She would go alone to the Moonpool and see if she could connect to Echosong or any of her other Clanmates in StarClan. Her paws hadn't led her there for a long time; Clan leaders didn't often go to the Moonpool without their medicine cats, but there was no reason why she shouldn't.

A tiny spark of hope and optimism woke inside Leafstar. She looked forward to meeting some of her old Clanmates again, and maybe, somehow, they would be able to give her answers.

Chapter 3

"Goldenpaw! Shinepaw!

Moonkit joined in with the rest of ThunderClan as they acclaimed the two new apprentices, who looked happy and proud as they stood beside their mentors, Finleap and Flipclaw. Their parents, Nightheart and Sunbeam, watched with shining eyes.

Inwardly, Moonkit was struggling with bitter disappointment. Once again she lived through the moment in the nursery when Nightheart had appeared to announce to his kits that they would be made apprentices the following day. But neither Nightheart nor any other cat had made the same announcement to her.

"Congratulations!" she had meowed, feeling sick as she forced the word out.

Goldenkit had given her a sympathetic purr. "It will be your turn soon," he had promised.

"I was looking forward to us all training together," Moonkit had mewed.

Shinekit had pressed her muzzle into Moonkit's shoulder. "It won't be long. You'll soon catch up to us."

But Moonkit hadn't found much comfort in her denmates' friendly words.

Now, as the Clan's acclamations died away, she turned to her mother, Thriftear. "Why aren't I being made an apprentice?" she asked. "I'm six moons old—only a few days younger than Shinepaw and Goldenpaw. Is it because Squirrelstar thinks I'm not good enough?"

The thought was so horrible that Moonkit wanted to flee back to the nursery and burrow deep down into the moss and bracken that covered the floor, hiding her shame from the rest of her Clan.

"No, of course not." Thriftear hesitated before continuing. "It's because we think you might have a different destiny within the Clan," she mewed eventually.

"Yes, we knew you were special from the day you were born," her father, Bayshine, told her, giving her a comforting lick around her ear. "So now that you're old enough to be apprenticed, we're going to have a talk with Jayfeather and Alderheart."

Moonkit stared at her father, stunned. "You mean I have to be a medicine cat?"

"That might be the way StarClan is guiding your paws," Thriftear mewed.

"But I don't *want* to be a medicine cat!" Moonkit burst out. *I want to be a warrior apprentice and learn fun stuff like hunting and battle moves. Not be stuck in a den all day learning about herbs!*

"We don't always get to choose," Bayshine responded. "And being a medicine cat is a great way to serve your Clan."

"This is about the way I look, isn't it?" Moonkit muttered, glaring mutinously at her parents.

She had been the only kit in her litter, and her face was split between two colors: one half of her was black, the other half orange tabby. Her eyes were different, too: amber on the black side, green on the other.

Thriftear and Bayshine had thought that her face looked like a half-moon, and that was why they had called her Moonkit. At first some cats had thought that she might be special—that through her, StarClan was sending ThunderClan a sign. But ThunderClan was used to her by now, and it had been a long time since she had heard any of the older cats discussing what the sign might be. Moonkit thought that they had decided that she wasn't special. Until now she had never imagined that she wouldn't become a warrior apprentice like her friends.

Bayshine didn't respond to Moonkit's question, and Thriftear gave her a gentle nudge toward the medicine cats' den. "Come along," she urged. "Jayfeather and Alderheart will be expecting us."

By now the Clan cats were dispersing to their duties. Moonkit spotted the two medicine cats disappearing behind the brambles that screened their den. Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were heading out of the camp with their mentors, on their way to tour the territory. Sick with jealousy, Moonkit watched them go.

Never mind, the voice inside her head whispered. *You've still got me.*

That doesn't help! Moonkit responded crossly. *I want to be a warrior apprentice like them.*

Maybe you can be, the voice told her. *Just don't tell any cat about me, or they'll make you be a medicine cat for sure!*

Moonkit couldn't remember a time when she hadn't had the voice in her head, whispering to her, making comments, asking questions. When she was a tiny kit, she had believed every cat had an invisible companion.

"What does your voice say to you?" she had asked her mother when they were curled up together in the nursery.

Thriftear had given her a puzzled look. "What voice?" she asked.

"Like the voice that talks to me," Moonkit had explained. "My friend in my head. I can't see her, but she's always with me."

Thriftear had looked confused, and a little suspicious, but as Moonkit was speaking, her expression had cleared. "Oh, your imaginary friend!" she exclaimed. "Kits sometimes have them, but not grown cats."

A giggle had come into the back of Moonkit's mind in response. *I'm not imaginary, am I? Thriftear just doesn't understand. Maybe it's better if you don't talk about me.*

So Moonkit hadn't told any other cat about the voice.

Now, as she followed her parents into the medicine cats' den, she found Alderheart and Jayfeather sitting in front of the storage cleft in the rock. The air was full of the clean tang of herbs. Two comfortable nests were placed at one side of the den, and Moonkit could hear the faint trickle of water as it ran down the rock face and formed a tiny pool at the base.

Until now, Moonkit hadn't seen much of ThunderClan's medicine cats, except when one or the other would come to the nursery to check on her and the other kits. Now she suddenly realized that she was facing two of the most powerful cats in the Clan—more powerful, maybe, than the Clan leader herself. These were cats who spoke regularly with the spirits of their warrior ancestors, and had even set paw in StarClan's hunting grounds. Almost overwhelmed, she ducked her head respectfully and stared at her paws.

"Come and sit down." Alderheart's voice was warm and kind. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Moonkit plopped down, aware of Bayshine and Thriftear sitting just behind her. Then, before any cat could speak, she heard the sound of another cat brushing through the bramble screen. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the newcomer was the Clan leader, Squirrelstar. A squeak of dismay almost escaped her, but she managed to keep her jaws clamped shut.

"Don't mind me," Squirrelstar meowed, sitting near the entrance and wrapping her tail around her paws. "I'm just here to listen."

"Okay," Jayfeather began, "let's get on with it." His blue gaze was fixed on Moonkit, and she felt that even though he was blind, he was able to see right through her. "What makes you think you might be a medicine cat?"

"I—I don't," Moonkit stammered.

An exasperated sigh escaped Jayfeather. "Then why are we here?"

"It's because of her divided face," Bayshine explained. "It's so unusual, we thought it must mean something."

"I know all about her face," Jayfeather responded with a disdainful sniff. "And fur is fur. It means nothing."

Even though Jayfeather sounded annoyed, Moonkit began to feel just a bit happier. *At least* he's *not interested in my face.*

"Have you had any dreams?" Alderheart asked her. "Anything that might possibly be a vision?"

Moonkit shook her head. "No. I dream about mice, mostly. And once I dreamed I was flying."

"Most cats dream like that," Alderheart purred, with a gleam of amusement in his amber eyes. "You haven't dreamed about cats with stars in their fur?"

Once more Moonkit shook her head. "Never."

"And have you seen anything . . . well, odd, while you're awake?"

"You mean like the three-legged rabbit Twigbranch brought back the other day?" Moonkit asked.

Jayfeather flexed his claws and twitched the tip of his tail. "No, not like the three-legged rabbit. Every cat saw that. Is there anything else you can tell us?"

Moonkit thought about the voice, and how it had warned her. "No, nothing," she murmured.

There was a stir of movement from Squirrelstar; glancing back, Moonkit saw that she had risen to her paws. “It’s your decision, of course,” she meowed to the two medicine cats. “But it doesn’t sound to me like she has any connection to StarClan.”

“I would agree with you,” Alderheart responded. “Jayfeather?”

“She’s not a medicine cat,” Jayfeather replied. “But I’m sure she’ll make a capable warrior.”

“Thank you!” Moonkit’s voice came out in a squeak, she was so surprised that Jayfeather had said something nice.

Squirrelstar looked down at her, satisfaction in her green gaze. “Then that’s settled. We’ll hold your apprentice ceremony tomorrow.”

Moonkit had to stop herself from leaping in the air and letting out a yowl of triumph. Instead she followed Thriftear and Bayshine out of the den, her measured paw steps and bowed head hiding the happiness that surged inside her.

There, her voice murmured. *That wasn’t so bad, was it?*

Moonkit didn’t reply. She had just spotted a glance exchanged between her parents, a look of . . . not disappointment exactly, more like surprise, or confusion, that she hadn’t been chosen as a medicine cat.

Is there something they’re not telling me?

“Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!”

As Squirrelstar’s voice rang out across the camp, Moonkit emerged from the nursery and padded up to where the cats of ThunderClan were already gathering. Thriftear and Bayshine padded along with her, one on each side. Her belly was churning with excitement; she wanted to squeal and jump around, but she reminded herself that behaving like that was what kits did; she was about to be an apprentice, so she made herself pad along calmly, her head and tail held high.

She was afraid that the voice in her head would distract her and disrupt her ceremony, but for once it was quiet. *And I hope it stays that way,* Moonkit thought.

Lionblaze had just appeared from the thorn tunnel, followed by Cinderheart and Twigbranch; all three cats were laden with prey. They bounded over to the fresh-kill pile, dropped their catch there, and joined their Clanmates below the Highledge, where Squirrelstar stood, her ginger fur glowing in a beam of sunlight. Jayfeather and Alderheart were already sitting outside their den, while Brambleclaw and the other elders emerged one by one from their den under the hazel bush.

As Moonkit approached, Goldenpaw and Shinepaw bounded up to her and touched noses with her, their eyes gleaming with excitement.

“I told you it wouldn’t be long!” Goldenpaw meowed.

When the Clan was assembled, Squirrelstar ran lightly down the tumbled rocks that led from the Highledge to the floor of the camp. The rest of the Clan arranged themselves in a ragged circle around her.

“Cats of ThunderClan,” the leader began, “once again we meet for a special day, because I must make yet another apprentice.” She beckoned with her tail. “Moonkit, come here, please.”

For a heartbeat Moonkit thought that her paws wouldn’t obey her, as if they were frozen to the ground. Then Thriftear gave her a gentle nudge and she padded forward until she stood in front of her Clan leader.

“From this day forward,” Squirrelstar announced, “this apprentice will be known as Moonpaw.” She touched Moonpaw’s shoulder with the tip of her tail. “Sunbeam, you will be her mentor. I trust that you will pass on to her your courage, your intelligence, and your commitment to your Clan.”

Moonpaw knew what to do because she had watched her denmates when they were made apprentices the day before. Ducking her head in thanks to Squirrelstar, she ran across the circle to where Sunbeam bent her head to touch noses with her.

“Moonpaw! Moonpaw!” the Clan yowled in acclamation.

In the midst of her own bursting pride, Moonpaw saw that Sunbeam’s eyes were shining with happiness. *It must be special for her, to be chosen as a mentor, when she was born a ShadowClan cat. It shows how much Squirrelstar trusts her.*

“We’ll go for our tour of the territory now,” Sunbeam meowed. “And then later we’ll join the others for a hunting lesson.”

Hearing Sunbeam’s welcoming words, Moonpaw decided that she was going to be the best apprentice ever.

The sun was going down, staining the waters of the lake with scarlet. Under the trees twilight was already gathering, but at the edge of the forest, on the slope leading down to the lakeshore, there was still enough light to see by.

“This is a great place to hunt,” Moonpaw’s mentor, Sunbeam, was meowing, waving her tail to take in the swath of vegetation between the trees and the pebbles at the water’s edge. “Especially in the morning and evening, when prey comes down to drink from the lake. Now I’m going to show you the hunter’s crouch again. Watch carefully, and then you can try it for yourself.”

Moonpaw tried to concentrate as Sunbeam placed her paws carefully and lowered herself so that hardly anything of her brown-and-white pelt was visible among the foliage. She was several days into her apprenticeship, and she hoped that finally she would manage to catch something and impress Sunbeam.

She’s a great mentor, Moonpaw thought. *I’m so lucky to have her.* She had spent much of her kithood in the nursery with Sunbeam and her kits, Shinekit and Goldenkit. Sunbeam was as familiar to her as her own mother, and Moonpaw wanted to make her proud.

She wanted to take in every detail of what Sunbeam was showing her, so that when her turn came, she would be able to get it right. But the whisper in the back of her mind just wouldn’t be quiet.

Do you like *Sunbeam? They say she used to be a ShadowClan cat. Do you think she—hey, I thought I heard a fox bark. Did you hear it?*

Sunbeam's real voice cut across the whisper. "Moonpaw, can you see how I have my paws lined up? That will help you keep your paw steps smooth when you start to stalk."

She's very bossy, isn't she? the voice asked. *Ooh, did you see that bird fly over? I wish you could leap high enough to catch it.*

I wish you would shut up! Moonpaw thought desperately. She couldn't learn properly when she was being distracted like this. *I want to listen to Sunbeam.*

"Moonpaw, what's wrong with you?" Sunbeam snapped, rising to her paws with her tail-tip twitching in frustration. "Why aren't you paying attention?"

I'm trying! Moonpaw wanted to yowl.

Because Thriftear had told her that grown cats didn't have imaginary friends, Moonpaw had expected that her voice would be silenced when she became an apprentice. But it hadn't been. If anything, it had become more talkative now that Moonpaw was out of the camp and learning so many different things.

It makes it so much harder for me to concentrate, Moonpaw thought.

"Okay, let me show you one more time." Sunbeam's voice was kind. "Put your forepaws there, and your hind paws there, and then crouch down so that your weight is equal over all four paws. Got that?"

Moonpaw nodded eagerly, copying her mentor's movements. "I've got it, Sunbeam."

"Not bad at all," Sunbeam purred, stretching out a paw to adjust the position of one of Moonpaw's hind paws. "Now let me see you stalk. Keep your tail well tucked in to your side and watch out for twigs and dead leaves."

Moonpaw prowled forward, trying to remember everything Sunbeam had taught her, until her tail brushed against a fern frond and set it waving wildly above her head. "Mouse dung!" she hissed. "I'm sorry, Sunbeam."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Sunbeam responded. "You were doing very well until then." She gave Moonpaw an encouraging lick on her ear. "So let's try something else," she continued. "Go down to the water's edge and see what you can catch—and remember that it's important to focus. I know you can be a great warrior if you put your mind to it."

"I'll do my best, Sunbeam!" Moonpaw promised.

StarClan, send me some prey! she begged as she headed down to the lake. This was the first time Sunbeam had sent her hunting on her own, and she was desperate to make her mentor proud.

Reaching the water's edge, Moonpaw took cover behind a boulder. She flinched a little at the unpleasant feeling of damp soil squishing between her pads, then reflected that the smell of water and mud would help swamp her own scent.

Moonpaw took up the hunter's crouch, remembering what Sunbeam had told her about where to put her paws and how to distribute her weight. She carefully kept her

tail low, arranging it along her side.

I'm doing it right! she told herself, pride thrilling through her from ears to tail-tip. *And the voice has gone quiet for once!*

Before long, Moonpaw spotted a squirrel slip out from the bushes and give a quick glance around before scampering down to the lake to drink. Emerging from cover, Moonpaw advanced paw step by paw step, hardly daring to breathe as she crept up on the squirrel. She imagined how she would carry it triumphantly back into camp, bringing fresh-kill to feed her Clan for the very first time.

But when Moonpaw was almost ready for her final dash and pounce, she caught sight of her own reflection in the lapping lake water. She saw her familiar, divided face, and another cat, a stranger, peering over her shoulder, as if it was standing behind her.

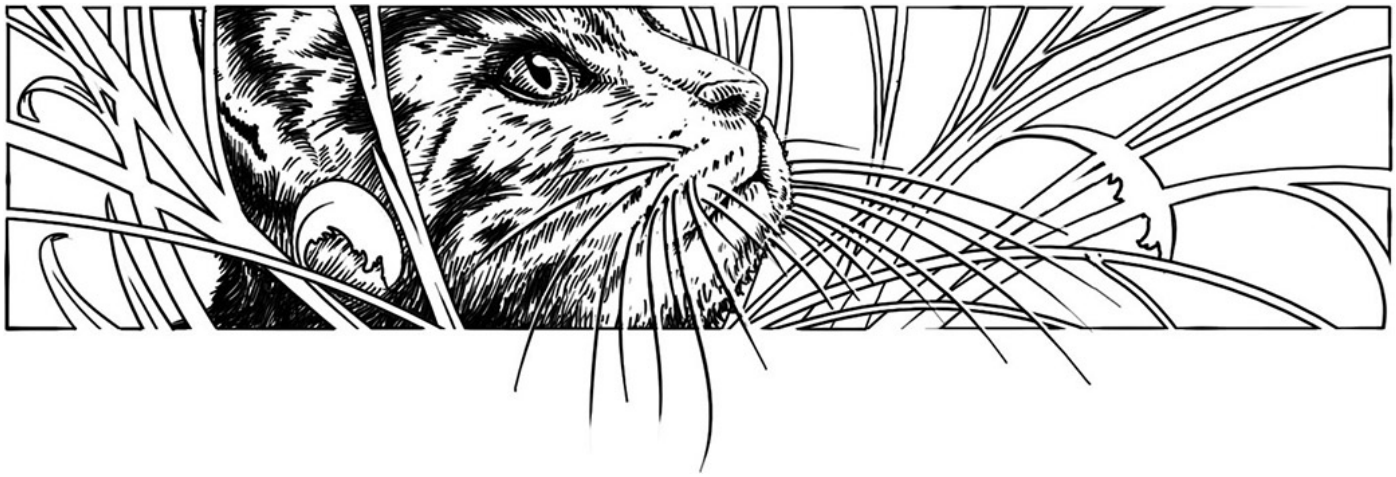
Startled, Moonpaw jerked to her paws, letting out an involuntary gasp. The squirrel sat upright in alarm, then raced off to disappear into the undergrowth.

Moonpaw barely noticed it go. Hurriedly, she twisted her neck to look back, but there was no cat behind her.

Did I really see that? she asked herself. *I couldn't have.*

But when she looked at her reflection, she still saw the small pale orange tabby cat looking over her shoulder. She met its green gaze. The orange tabby was exactly the same color and pattern as the left side of Moonpaw's face. Who was it?

Don't tell any cat, the reflected cat mewed, its voice familiar in her head. *This is our secret.*



Chapter 4

In the ShadowClan warriors' den, Tawnypelt woke from a nap and stretched her jaws into a massive yawn. Giving her pelt a shake, she slid out into the open, twitching her ears at the distant roaring of Twoleg monsters.

I'm glad they're no closer, she reflected. *They're SkyClan's problem, not ours.*

But she still felt a shiver in her fur, as if a whole nest of ants were crawling through it. She could never hear that kind of grinding roar without remembering how Twolegs had destroyed their territory in the old forest, driving them out and forcing them to make the Great Journey to the lake.

Spotting Tigerstar and the ShadowClan deputy, Cloverfoot, with their heads together just outside the Clan leader's den, Tawnypelt padded across to find out what they were discussing so seriously.

"We need to keep an eye on SkyClan," Tigerstar was meowing as Tawnypelt approached. "I don't like the way they've been hunting more often on the strip of land that borders our territory. I wouldn't put it past them to cross it if they thought they could get away with it."

"You're not wrong," Cloverfoot responded. "I was leading a border patrol yesterday when we spotted SkyClan hunters chasing a rabbit that ran onto our territory. They would have crossed our border to snatch it if my patrol and I hadn't caught them. For a few moments I thought it was going to come to claws."

"Well done stopping them," Tigerstar grunted. "This is all because of the message that Tree brought us the other day," he continued. "They claim that their stream has been poisoned by Twolegs, and it's making cats and prey sick."

Cloverfoot nodded. "They say the only healthy prey they can find is close to our borders."

Tigerstar let out a huff of disbelief. "Warriors always have some excuse to hunt prey across another Clan's borders," he growled.

"Oh, I believe Tree," Cloverfoot mewed, tilting her head thoughtfully to one side. "He's a trustworthy cat, even if he is a bit weird."

Tawnypelt could see that Tigerstar wasn't impressed. "Other patrols have reported scenting SkyClan actually *on* our territory," the Clan leader pointed out. "I think they're definitely stealing prey, and we need to keep an eye open so we can stop them. We—"

Worried by the way the discussion was going, Tawnypelt felt she had to interrupt. "Aren't you going to send a patrol to check out the Twoleg noise?" she asked. "You might be too young to remember, but I know you've heard the stories of how Twolegs destroyed the Clan territories in the old forest and drove us away. They were using terrible monsters that sounded just like these. You need to take this seriously, Tigerstar."

The ShadowClan leader gave her a look that told Tawnypelt he hadn't appreciated her interruption, then shrugged. "Twolegs are always making noises and doing things that we can't understand," he declared. "Besides, they're not doing them on our territories this time. The stream will recover. SkyClan is just trying to convince us to let them hunt across our border." He bared his teeth. "*That's* never going to happen, especially if they're already sneaking over to hunt without permission."

"But the Twoleg issue could be bigger than any border dispute," Tawnypelt insisted. "That's what you should be worrying about."

Tigerstar stiffened. "I'll decide how ShadowClan is run, thank you very much," he snapped.

Tawnypelt realized that she had to stop arguing. She knew Tigerstar was sensitive about her looking over his shoulder. She was his mother, but she had stepped down as Clan deputy when ShadowClan reformed under Tigerstar and, she believed, needed new blood. She didn't have any right to order him around now.

I'll talk to him about it later, she resolved. *When no other cat is listening.*

Cloverfoot rose to her paws. "It's time I organized the evening border patrol," she meowed.

Tigerstar fixed his mother with an amber glare. "Since you're so confident about how we should deal with our border issues, maybe you should lead it."

Okay, Tigerstar, be as grouchy as you like, Tawnypelt thought, unbothered by the Clan leader's gruff tones. Tigerstar's snarl had always been worse than his bite. *Just as long as he doesn't speak to me like that in front of the younger warriors,* she added to herself. *They're already disrespectful enough.*

Still, the idea of leading a patrol actually sounded great; she would like to get out of camp and stretch her legs.

"Sure," she agreed. "And if it's all right with you, Cloverfoot, I'll take Birchfeather with me. It'll be good to catch up with my son's youngest kit."

"Fine. I'll call him for you," Cloverfoot mewed.

Both she-cats ignored Tigerstar's huff of irritation, though as Cloverfoot turned away, Tawnypelt thought she caught a gleam of amusement in the deputy's eyes.

Tawnypelt shivered a little in the evening chill as she and Birchfeather trekked across the territory, renewing the border markers as they went. It had not been long since the young brown tom had been made a warrior, and he took his duties seriously, sniffing the air every few paw steps for any signs of trespassing cats. But he hadn't lost his playfulness, amusing Tawnypelt with stories of giving badger rides to Lightleap's three kits and showing her how he had let them drive him squealing from the camp.

They began the patrol on the RiverClan side, by the half-bridge and the small Thunderpath, and by the time they reached their border with SkyClan, it was almost completely dark. The moon was nearly full, lighting their paw steps, though the pine

trees cast dark shadows across their path. Tawnypelt was aware of prey scurrying in the undergrowth, and somewhere overhead an owl hooted.

Then, as they drew close to the border, she stiffened in surprise, stretching out her tail for Birchfeather to halt. She had thought that Cloverfoot might have been exaggerating, and that they would find only a trace of SkyClan scent, if any, but here—well inside the ShadowClan border—there was a strong scent of SkyClan, as if the SkyClan cats had crossed several times recently.

Opening her jaws to taste the air, Tawnypelt realized that she was picking up the scent of only one cat. She tried to identify it, but it wasn't from a cat she recognized.

Probably not a senior warrior, then. But definitely SkyClan.

"This is a single warrior, not a patrol," she murmured to Birchfeather. "They've been here more than once, but there's no sign that they made a kill. Is it a spy crossing our borders? We'll have to report this to Tigerstar." When Birchfeather didn't respond, she added, "What do you think? You probably know the scent of more junior warriors in the other Clans better than I do."

While she had been speaking, Tawnypelt noticed that Birchfeather was growing more and more uncomfortable, shifting his paws and wriggling his shoulders as if he were trying to get rid of a clinging bramble tendril.

"What's the matter, Birchfeather?" Tawnypelt asked.

"Uh . . . nothing."

"Yeah, sure," Tawnypelt snorted. "I know guilty behavior when I see it. Come on; spit it out."

"It's not a spy!" Birchfeather exclaimed, his eyes wide with distress. "It's not an invader, or a SkyClan cat hunting on our territory. It's a cat I've been meeting secretly, here on the border. Her name is Ridgeglow, and she's so beautiful." His gaze grew dreamy. "She has such a cute little white nose! We're in love."

Tawnypelt rolled her eyes. *Young cats!* "What in StarClan's name are you doing, meeting in secret?" she asked Birchfeather. "Since we changed the code, it's not forbidden for cats to fall in love across Clan borders. You don't need to sneak around."

"Sorry." Birchfeather ducked his head. "I've been afraid of what Tigerstar will say."

"There's no need for that," Tawnypelt reassured him, pressing her nose briefly against his shoulder. "Both your parents will understand. If any cat knows what it's like to fall for some cat in another Clan, it's Tigerstar and Dovewing."

And they may be thrilled to have a new cat join their family in ShadowClan, she thought to herself. *I know losing Birchfeather's littermate, Rowankit, hit them both hard.*

Birchfeather brightened as he listened to Tawnypelt's reassurance, and his paw steps were light and eager as they finished their patrol of the border and headed back to camp.

“I promise I won’t sneak around anymore,” he told Tawnypelt. “You’re right; I should tell the truth to my parents—to my Clan leader—as soon as we get back.”

But when the two cats slid their way through the brambles that surrounded the ShadowClan camp, Birchfeather hesitated instead of heading straight for the Clan leader’s den.

“Will you come with me, Tawnypelt?” he begged. “I really need your support while I talk to my parents. I’m their last-born, and the only survivor of my litter, and they still treat me like a kit, even though I’m a full-grown warrior!”

Privately Tawnypelt thought that the young tom was behaving as if he had bees in his brain. There was no way that Tigerstar and Dovewing would have a serious problem with this. Still, she felt a little flattered that he would rely on her.

“Okay, let’s do it,” she mewed.

Tigerstar and Dovewing were peacefully sharing a vole outside their den when Tawnypelt and Birchfeather crossed the camp to stand in front of them.

“Anything to report?” Tigerstar asked Tawnypelt.

Birchfeather took a deep breath. “*I* have something,” he replied. “The SkyClan scent on the border isn’t because of prey-stealing. It’s because of me. I’ve fallen in love with a SkyClan cat, and we’ve been meeting secretly. It’s her scent that the patrols have picked up.”

Tigerstar and Dovewing exchanged a surprised glance. “Why didn’t you tell us this before?” Dovewing asked.

“I’ve been scared to speak to you,” Birchfeather confessed. “But after I talked to Tawnypelt, I realized that she’s right. There’s nothing wrong with the choice I’m making.” His eyes glowed with love and resolve. “I’m going to become a SkyClan warrior so that I can be with Ridgeglow.”

Tawnypelt gaped at him in dismay, her belly beginning to roil with apprehension. She had assumed that Ridgeglow would come to be with Birchfeather in the Clan of his birth. She had certainly never expected Birchfeather to leave ShadowClan.

Tigerstar is going to blame me for this.

Dovewing’s eyes were wide with distress, while Tigerstar’s face reminded Tawnypelt of a looming dark cloud before the storm breaks.

“What did you say?” he growled. “You want to leave your Clan? Are you completely bee-brained? What about loyalty? What about the warrior code?”

“And you encouraged him, Tawnypelt?” Dovewing’s voice was breaking. “How *could* you?”

Oh, no . . . , Tawnypelt thought, just as appalled. Dovewing and Tigerstar had once fallen in love from different Clans, but they loved their kits fiercely, and it was a different matter, she knew, when an inter-Clan romance might take their kit away from them. *They aren’t going to take this well. But this isn’t what I meant at all.*

Chapter 5

Warm sunlight flooded the gorge, soaking into Leafstar's fur as she lay stretched out on the ledge outside her den. Billystorm was with her, giving himself a long and careful grooming, while Sharpclaw and Bouncefire were discussing the latest hunt.

Far below at the bottom of the gorge she could see the tiny figures of cats going about their duties: Sparrowpelt and Cherrytail returning across the Rockpile with prey dangling from their mouths; Waspwhisker and Ebonyclaw beside the river, teaching a new battle move to their apprentices; Echosong laying out herbs to dry in front of her den. Leafstar let out a soft purr of pride to see her Clanmates working so well together.

A black shadow swept over Leafstar; startled, she looked up to see a crow, swooping so low that she could almost have reached up and grabbed it out of the sky. The bird let out a deep, unnatural croak; it sounded almost like the noise a Twoleg monster would make.

Dragged back to the waking world, Leafstar opened her eyes. The harsh Twoleg roaring still rang in her ears. *That was the crow's call from my dream.* Old grief rose up inside her as she remembered that the cats she had relaxed with on the ledge were all hunting with StarClan now. She felt old, and all her muscles ached from her disappointing trek to the Moonpool the day before.

No StarClan cats came to me, not even Echosong. They had nothing to say.

Rising to her paws, Leafstar left her den and sat at the entrance, gazing around the camp. The fresh-kill pile was worryingly small. By now most of the Clan had tried eating the healthy-looking prey, and none of them had sickened, but healthy prey was difficult to find. And the problem would only get worse when the cold of leaf-bare descended.

Leafstar sat erect and shook out her pelt as she spotted Hawkwing padding across the camp. Halting very close to her, he dipped his head respectfully.

"What happened on your trip to the Moonpool?" he asked. "Did StarClan have any advice for us?"

A worm of uneasiness writhed in Leafstar's belly. "No," she replied. "I didn't get any messages at all from StarClan. I had hoped to reach Echosong, but . . ." She shook her head.

"I wonder why," Hawkwing murmured, his amber eyes growing anxious. "Surely the spirits of our ancestors would want to help us."

"I hoped so," Leafstar responded. "And there's something else that bothers me."

Hawkwing's gaze was questioning. "Oh?"

"There were strange, bright Twoleg marks smeared on the ground around the Moonpool," Leafstar told him, her apprehension mounting as she remembered the evidence of Twolegs in a place that was so important to cats. "And even some markings

on the spiral path that leads down to the pool. And on the top of the hollow, beside the line of bushes, there was a pile of Twoleg . . . stuff: huge, hard, shiny things."

"I wonder what it all means," Hawkwing meowed, his anxious look deepening.

"I have no idea," Leafstar responded, "but I do know that Twolegs have no business being there. I just hate the idea of them stomping around on their huge paws. The Moonpool is *our* place."

"What do you think we should do about it?" her deputy asked.

Leafstar sighed. "I don't know. I'll tell Frecklewish and Fidgetflake what I saw, and I'll bring it up to the other Clans at tonight's Gathering. But if Twolegs really are moving in there, I don't see what we can do to stop them."

Hawkwing nodded agreement, but he had nothing to say.

"You know, Hawkwing," Leafstar continued, "lately I've been wondering if it was a good thing that we traveled to the lake, and that we've stayed here for so long, when we could have gone back to the gorge. When we were there, we didn't have to compete with other Clans for prey or territory. All the decisions we made were just our own."

"Until Darktail drove us out," Hawkwing reminded her. "We could have done with help from other Clans then."

"Yes, but Darktail is long gone," Leafstar pointed out. "We could have gone back. Perhaps we should have."

"You can't really believe that, Leafstar," Hawkwing responded swiftly. "By the lake is where we belong. StarClan has been quite clear that there must be five Clans here. This is the right place for us."

Leafstar was grateful for her deputy's certainty, and she wished she could share it. She was still plagued by doubts. "I'm getting old," she sighed. "It makes me think about my past, about whether I've made the right decisions as leader of SkyClan. You'll know how it feels one day, Hawkwing. You'll be the cat making hard choices for your Clan."

Hawkwing's ears flicked up in alarm. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You're not on your last life, are you?"

Leafstar let out a soft purr of laughter. "No—I would have told you. But all cats can die of old age, even a Clan leader. I'm all right, though. Just feeling thoughtful."

Hawkwing gave her shoulder an affectionate nuzzle and curled up beside her, his fur brushing hers comfortingly. Leafstar relaxed, letting her anxieties go for a while. *I'm so lucky to have Hawkwing as my deputy,* she thought. *Now I know that whatever happens, my Clan will have strong leadership when finally I go to StarClan.*

The full moon floated above the trees as Leafstar led her Clan along the lakeshore, past the half-bridge, and onto RiverClan territory. The night was peaceful; no clouds threatened to cover the moon, and the lake shone silver in the frosty light.

When she arrived at the tree-bridge, WindClan was just crossing, and ThunderClan was approaching from the opposite direction. When the bridge was clear, Leafstar gave a gracious wave of her tail to let Squirrelstar and her cats go first.

Politeness might go a long way when I'm going to ask a favor.

As she pushed through the bushes and into the clearing around the Great Oak, Leafstar realized that SkyClan was the last to arrive. The other four leaders had already taken their places in the branches of the tree. In newleaf and greenleaf they would have been almost hidden by the foliage, but now the oak leaves were turning brown and falling into drifts around the roots. The four leaders were clearly visible, sitting erect and gazing down proudly at their Clans.

The ground seemed spread with a covering of mingled colors of fur: black and white and tabby, tortoiseshell and orange, shifting perpetually as the assembled cats found a place to sit, or headed to greet friends in other Clans. Leafstar had to push her way through the heaving mass of cats to spring up and take her place in the fork between a wide branch and the tree trunk. Hawkwing followed her and hopped up onto the oak roots between Crowfeather and Cloverfoot.

"Let the Gathering begin," Squirrelstar announced, rising to her paws and moving forward along her branch. "The prey is running well in ThunderClan, and we have made three new apprentices: Shinepaw, Goldenpaw, and Moonpaw."

"Shinepaw! Goldenpaw! Moonpaw!" The assembled Clans yowled their welcome.

Looking down, Leafstar spotted the three ThunderClan apprentices, all of them sitting together near the edge of the clearing. In the bright moonlight her sight was clear enough to make out their shapes and colors, though the details of their faces were only a blur.

Goldenpaw, she assumed, was the strong, healthy-looking golden tabby tom, and next to him was a lithe black she-cat that she guessed was Shinepaw. Although their pelts were different, the shape of their heads and the set of their shoulders were so much alike that Leafstar thought they must be littermates.

The third apprentice was sitting a little distance away, and she was the strangest-looking cat that Leafstar had ever seen. Half of her face was tortoiseshell, and half was pale orange tabby. Unlike the others, who sat with their chests puffed out with pride at the acclamations, Moonpaw was shrinking back, slightly intimidated, as if the noise was spooking her.

Weird, Leafstar thought. *What sort of warrior will* she *make?*

Meanwhile Squirrelstar had withdrawn, and Harestar rose to make his report. "WindClan has plenty of prey," the Clan leader announced. "A few days ago, a dog was loose on our territory and tried to enter our camp, but Crowfeather led a patrol and chased it off." He sat down again.

Leafstar had listened patiently while the other leaders gave their news, but now she sprang up before Tigerstar or Icestar could speak.

"First I have to announce that SkyClan has two new apprentices," she declared. *I have much more important things to talk about, but I can't deny Robinpaw and Starlingpaw their moment to shine.* "Please welcome Robinpaw and Starlingpaw."

"Robinpaw! Starlingpaw!" the Clans yowled.

Leafstar looked down at the two young cats, both of them bursting with pride, and wished that she could end her report there. But she couldn't hide what was happening in her Clan.

"Twolegs have moved in just outside our territory," she began as the acclamations died away. "The noise and activity are disrupting Clan life, and the Twolegs have done something to the water in the stream. It's not safe to drink, and it's making prey sick, which makes it hard for us to find enough fresh-kill."

"That's tough," Icestar murmured sympathetically.

"My cats are hungry," Leafstar continued. "So I'm asking you, Squirrelstar and Tigerstar, if just for now you'll allow us to follow prey that we've chased over the border from our territory to yours."

As she spoke, Leafstar became aware of movement among the cats in the clearing below, and one or two of them called out a protest. But all her attention was fixed on the two leaders.

She saw that Squirrelstar was looking undecided, but before the ThunderClan leader could speak, Tigerstar sprang to his paws, his voice full of scorn. "Twolegs are always causing trouble," he meowed. "But you can't be sure that they're behind what has happened to the stream. The sickness could be happening naturally. Or maybe SkyClan was eating prey that was past its prime."

Leafstar felt every hair on her pelt rising in outrage. "Prey past its prime? Do you think that SkyClan cats have thistle-fluff between their ears? I tell you that the prey is sick, and—"

"Either way," Tigerstar interrupted, "SkyClan warriors should be able to work out how to hunt so that you can catch enough prey on your own territory."

"Leafstar isn't wrong," Squirrelstar put in, with a sympathetic glance at her. "My warriors have caught sickly prey near our border with SkyClan, and now it looks as if it came over from there. Something is happening that shouldn't be."

Tigerstar seemed to relax, looking less hostile. "Okay," he growled. "But it's still not a good idea to change the rules about the borders. That's a slippery slope, and who knows where it will end? I'm not about to give prey away out of my own Clan's mouth, especially not when it seems leaf-bare is coming early. Absolutely not! ShadowClan has kits and elders of its own to feed."

Leafstar hadn't expected anything else from Tigerstar, but she cast a hopeful look at Squirrelstar, who had seemed more understanding. Her hope withered away as Squirrelstar regretfully shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I agree with Tigerstar," the ThunderClan leader declared. "We also need all the prey we can catch. Just now we have more cats than any other Clan. Leafstar, you and your Clanmates will have to survive without ThunderClan or ShadowClan prey."

Squirrelstar's response disappointed Leafstar, but she wasn't surprised. *If I'm honest, I would probably give the same answer if some cat asked to hunt on SkyClan*

territory.

She could pick up the same sense of disappointment from the SkyClan cats in the clearing below; hisses of frustration and anxious murmurs rose to her ears as they realized that no cat was willing to help them.

I'm letting them down, she thought, guilt washing over her like an icy wave. *But what more can I do?*

She dipped her head, accepting that the issue was decided, and SkyClan couldn't expect help from any other Clan. Then to her surprise, Icestar, the RiverClan leader, rose to her paws and turned to her.

"I could send some warriors over to you, to teach you how to fish from your strip of lakeshore," she suggested. "The stream may be dangerous, but the lake is large enough to be safe."

Leafstar was taken aback by the suggestion. "That's very kind of you, Icestar," she responded.

"I know that the other Clans don't really appreciate how good fish can be," Icestar continued. "But you're ignoring a good source of food."

Leafstar shuddered a little inwardly at the thought of fish. She had eaten it a few times back in the gorge, but over the years she had lost her taste for it. *It's so cold and strange-tasting!* But she was sure that her Clan could learn to stomach fish if they came to the point where the alternative was starvation.

"Thank you, Icestar," she meowed. "We're very grateful, and we'll welcome your warriors."

Icestar dipped her head and had opened her jaws to make her own report when Tawnypelt rose to her paws from where she sat below in the clearing among her Clanmates.

"I'm glad we've worked out some help for Leafstar and her Clan," she began, "but what about the Twolegs? Their noise has disrupted SkyClan, and whatever they did to the stream has sickened SkyClan prey, but do we know why the Twolegs are here in the first place? What if it's not only SkyClan who'll be affected? Shouldn't we be concerned?"

"Nonsense!" Tigerstar snapped. Leafstar wondered what Tawnypelt had done to make the ShadowClan leader look so annoyed with her. "The other Clans have no reason to worry. The Twoleg activity is nowhere near our territories. There'll be time enough to start getting upset about it if it moves closer."

Tawnypelt dipped her head in response, but she didn't look satisfied, and Leafstar guessed that she would be having words with her leader—her son—when they returned to camp.

The ShadowClan warrior's words had reminded Leafstar of what else was bothering her. "There's something else I have to tell you," she declared. "Last night I went to the Moonpool to consult my warrior ancestors."

"Did they give you any guidance?" Harestar asked curiously.

Leafstar shook her head, trying not to let the memory of that frustrating night get in the way of what she had to tell the other Clans. “They didn’t meet with me,” she replied. “But that isn’t what I want to tell you.” She took a breath and let her gaze travel around the clearing as she made her announcement. “Twolegs have been to the Moonpool.”

Her announcement brought gasps of dismay from the cats in the clearing below. The moonlight caught gleams from their eyes as they cast confused glances at each other.

“How do you know?” Breezepelt of WindClan called out.

“The Twolegs have left brightly colored markings around the pool and on the spiral path,” Leafstar explained. “And they have left some stuff beside the bushes at the top of the hollow. I don’t know what it all means, but it surely can’t be good news that the Twolegs have discovered the Moonpool.”

Looking down to where the medicine cats were all sitting together, Leafstar saw that sudden discussion had broken out among them, their heads together and their tails twitching in agitation. They seemed especially to be questioning Frecklewish and Fidgetflake, though they were too far away for Leafstar to hear what they were saying.

“The Twolegs haven’t done anything to the Moonpool itself?” Harestar asked.

Leafstar shook her head. “No.” *Not yet,* she added silently to herself.

“Then I think you’re exaggerating the problem,” Tigerstar meowed, with a look of contempt. “Maybe to make us think we’ve reason to be afraid of Twolegs, and let you hunt on our territory.”

“I would never dream of doing such a thing!” Leafstar struggled to control her indignation, digging her claws hard into her branch. She knew she couldn’t attack Tigerstar and break the Gathering truce, however much she might want to claw the whiskers off his smug face. “That doesn’t even make sense!”

But however much she protested, she could see that the other leaders were inclined to agree with Tigerstar, at least that there was no reason to worry about the Moonpool.

“Twolegs are going to do what they do,” Harestar pointed out. “There isn’t much that the Clans can do to stop it. As long as the medicine cats can still use the Moonpool, we shouldn’t worry.”

“What do the medicine cats think?” Squirrelstar asked. Gazing down to where the group of them were sitting, she added, “Have any of you seen Twoleg signs at the Moonpool?”

It was her own medicine cat, Jayfeather, who replied, rising to his paws and turning in the direction of his leader’s voice. “Everything seemed fine at our last half-moon meeting.”

“Yes, we didn’t see any Twoleg stuff that night,” Puddleshine of ShadowClan agreed. “But we’ll have a good look around the next time we’re up there.”

The other medicine cats murmured assent.

“Soon it will be too cold for the Twolegs to keep up their activity,” Icestar meowed in a reassuring voice. “Surely they’ll give up and go back inside their dens until newleaf.”

Leafstar's belly roiled with frustration that no cat seemed to be ready to listen to her. Even the medicine cats were brushing off her news about the Moonpool. Then she heard the voice of her deputy, Hawkwing, and looked down to see that he had risen from his place on the oak root.

"Leafstar is an experienced leader, and her worries ought to be taken seriously," he declared. Rootspring and Violetshine, and several more of the SkyClan warriors, let out meows of agreement. "We don't want to wait until it's too late to listen to her warning."

"Hawkwing is right." Crowfeather spoke up, surprising Leafstar with the vehemence of his tone. "Remember what happened to the old forest territories because of Twolegs. Don't pretend that something like that couldn't happen here. Even if we can't stop the Twolegs from doing what they want to do, we should find out what it is and be prepared. Besides," he added, with a scorching glance at the medicine cats, "if the Twolegs decide to mess with the Moonpool, we're all in big trouble."

Silence followed the WindClan deputy's words. Leafstar wanted to yowl his name in acclamation, that there was at least one cat with a brain in his head and the will to use it. Instead she let her gaze flick from one leader to the next, pleased to see how taken aback they were by Hawkwing's and Crowfeather's words.

"He has a point," Squirrelstar murmured.

"Yes," Icestar agreed. "We wouldn't want to look back and think 'if only we'd investigated properly right at the beginning.'"

"Very well," Tigerstar growled after a moment's hesitation. "It looks like we should send a patrol, including a cat from each Clan, to investigate what the Twolegs are doing. Crowfeather, you seem to feel strongly about this, so you had better lead it. I'll send Tawnypelt as ShadowClan's representative, and you other leaders can choose whichever cats you want."

The other leaders nodded, though Leafstar thought Harestar looked a bit annoyed to have his choice made for him. *But it's a good choice,* she thought. *Crowfeather is a thoroughly trustworthy cat.*

"Meanwhile," Tigerstar went on, "the medicine cats will check what is going on at the Moonpool when they meet at the next half-moon and let their Clan leaders know if they see any reason to be concerned."

No cat wanted to argue with that, though Leafstar wondered wryly whether they gave their approval because Tigerstar's plan put off more difficult decisions, at least for a while.

When the other leaders had made their reports, Tigerstar brought the Gathering to an end, and Leafstar led her Clan back home along the shore of the lake.

In spite of the decision to send a patrol to investigate the Twoleg activity, she was still struggling with feelings of frustration. It didn't help that her Clanmates shared her feelings; it was as though she had failed them.

"The other Clans are just selfish!" Violetshine complained. "It's so short-sighted, refusing to share prey with us. Have they forgotten how all the Clans struggled together

against Darktail?”

“Or against Splashtail,” Wrenflight added, her tone somber.

“Bad things happen when the Clans refuse to help each other,” Rootspring agreed. “We need to cooperate to thrive!”

Leafstar twitched her ears and did not respond. Every paw step back to her own territory felt harder than the last, as if she were carrying a heavy weight. *Bad things happen,* Rootspring had said. It was true. Leafstar felt as though something very bad was looming on the horizon.

Chapter 6

A ray of sunlight striking into the apprentices' den woke Moonpaw; she sat up, blinking blearily. She hardly felt as though a couple of heartbeats had passed since she had crawled into her nest after the Gathering, and yet it was already morning.

Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were awake, giving themselves a swift but efficient grooming. Neither of them looked as sleepy as Moonpaw felt.

"The Gathering was great!" Goldenpaw exclaimed with a satisfied sigh. "It was amazing, crossing the tree-bridge to the island and seeing the clearing full of cats."

"And we got to talk to cats from other Clans," Shinepaw agreed. "It was really interesting, listening to Starlingpaw telling us all about the problems in SkyClan. Don't you think so, Moonpaw?"

But I didn't get to listen, Moonpaw thought resentfully. She had been too distracted by the voice inside her head to pay attention to what was going on around her. *It just wouldn't shut up, and I missed nearly everything.*

"Moonpaw wouldn't talk to any cat," Shinepaw pointed out.

"There's no need to be shy," Goldenpaw assured Moonpaw kindly; he had obviously noticed her ignoring the other apprentices. "Starlingpaw and Robinpaw were really nice. And it's fine to talk to cats from other Clans at a Gathering. Didn't Sunbeam tell you that?"

"Of course she did," Moonpaw muttered, annoyed that they thought that her mentor might have been forgetful.

"And just think," Shinepaw went on excitedly, "we get to go and do that again, nearly every full moon! I can't wait for the next one. And then," she added to Moonpaw, "you really should make the effort to be friendly to other cats."

Without waiting for a reply, she and Goldenpaw left the den, brushing through the sheltering ferns.

Moonpaw sat up, shook the debris from her nest out of her fur, and began to groom herself.

You don't need to talk to other cats, do you? her voice said. *You've got me.*

But I'm a Clan cat, Moonpaw protested. *There's stuff I need to do. And there are times when I can talk to you, and times when I can't.*

A giggle came from her inward voice. *Oh, you can* always *talk to me!*

Moonpaw did her best to ignore the voice. Fearing she was missing some important duty by listening to it, she gave her shoulder a last hasty lick and scrambled out after her denmates, still trying to blink sleep out of her eyes.

When Moonpaw emerged into the camp, she spotted Goldenpaw and Shinepaw talking to their mentors beside the fresh-kill pile. But before she had the chance to look

around for Sunbeam, some cat called out, “Moonpaw!” and she was immediately surrounded by a crowd of the younger warriors.

“How was your first Gathering?” Stemtail asked. “Was it exciting?”

“Did you enjoy it?” Graywhisker added.

For a few moments Moonpaw was bewildered by the press of fur around her, hardly able to stay steady on her paws. “I dunno . . . I’m just so sleepy,” she muttered.

“Hey, it was your *first Gathering*,” Bristleclaw reminded her, looking confused. “That’s kind of a big deal, you know.”

Oh, no, not this again! Moonpaw just wanted them to leave her alone so that she could catch her breath. But she knew she had to say something, or they would think she was weird for not enjoying herself. “Oh, yes, it was *very* exciting!” she mewed, forcing her tired limbs into a little bounce. “I saw all the leaders from all the Clans, and all the deputies and the medicine cats! They were *so* impressive.”

To her relief, her Clanmates seemed satisfied with that. “I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Stemtail purred, and Bristleclaw added, “Yeah, I’ll never forget my first Gathering,” and gave Moonpaw a friendly flick over the ear with her tail-tip.

“Excuse me, I have to go to the dirtplace.” Moonpaw dipped her head to the young warriors and scurried across the camp, wondering whether she *should* be feeling more excited about everything.

She was still thinking it over when she came back from the dirtplace. *Is there something weird about me that I don’t feel more excited about being a ThunderClan apprentice?* She had wanted it so much, especially when she’d thought she might have to be a medicine cat, but somehow she couldn’t work up much enthusiasm.

The truth was, she had been thinking almost nonstop about the voice in her head, the voice that no other cat seemed to have. It had been chattering all through the Gathering, so that Moonpaw could hardly pay attention to the arguments among the leaders or talk to any other cats. And she had been unable to forget the cat she had seen in the lake, looking over the shoulder of her reflection.

Moonpaw had known since she was a kit that none of her Clanmates seemed to speak to invisible cats, but it was only now that she began to question whether something was seriously wrong with her.

Maybe I should consult the medicine cats.

Looking around the stone hollow, she couldn’t see her fellow apprentices anywhere, and there was no sign of Sunbeam, either. Maybe she could snatch a few moments to talk to a medicine cat.

Brushing past the brambles that screened the medicine cats’ den from the rest of the camp, Moonpaw spotted Alderheart at the back wall where the herbs were stored. She drew a breath of relief that she had found the younger medicine cat; the cranky, irritable Jayfeather was kind of intimidating.

“Alderheart . . . ,” she began uncertainly.

The medicine cat glanced back over his shoulder. “Moonpaw,” he greeted her. “Are you sick or injured?”

“No, nothing like that,” Moonpaw replied.

“I’m pretty busy at the moment,” Alderheart mewed, giving her a look that suggested she was distracting him. Healthy cats obviously didn’t interest him right now, and he turned back to whatever he was doing with the herbs.

Moonpaw hesitated, not sure how to ask the questions that were taking up so much of her mind. She didn’t want to sound like an unhinged cat, or an immature kit. Even worse, she didn’t want to give him a reason to think there was something wrong with her.

Then Moonpaw remembered what she had heard about half-moon meetings: that the medicine cats saw the spirits of the warrior cats’ ancestors. *Maybe I should act curious about medicine-cat stuff.*

“Alderheart, what do you see in the Moonpool when you go for meetings?” she asked, picturing a medicine cat crouching over the water and seeing a spirit cat staring back, like the cat she had seen in the lake.

Alderheart glanced back at her, still with the same preoccupied air, then continued working with the herbs. “It’s difficult to explain to a cat who has never been to the Moonpool, and there’s a lot that we aren’t allowed to tell,” he replied, then muttered to himself, “We’re running a bit low on tansy. I should ask the warriors to collect some more.”

Moonpaw could hear in his voice that he had almost forgotten she was there, but she wasn’t going to give up. “I heard that our ancestors show themselves to the medicine cats in some way,” she meowed, trying to sound really puzzled. “What happens, exactly?”

Alderheart let out a sigh and turned to face her. “We crouch down by the Moonpool and touch our noses to the water,” he explained with a faint trace of irritation. “Then we dream ourselves into StarClan, where our warrior ancestors show themselves to us so they can impart wisdom and guidance. We can see them and hear their voices.” Huffing out a breath, he added, “I don’t know how else to describe it. It would make more sense if you were a medicine cat, attending the meetings.”

Moonpaw nodded. *That doesn’t sound like what happened to me at all.* She had been wide awake, not dreaming, and the cat had been behind her, not in front. “But has any medicine cat ever heard . . . voices talking to them?” she asked. “Voices belonging to a cat they couldn’t see? Like the voice is *inside* them somehow?”

Alderheart startled. Moonpaw could see that she had his full attention now, and she wasn’t sure she liked it. All his limbs had stiffened, and his fur had begun to bush up. A shadow seemed to pass over his eyes, telling her that he was imagining something . . . something that unsettled him. She suppressed a shiver, disturbed by his expression.

“Where is this coming from?” Alderheart asked. His voice was shaking a little, disturbing Moonpaw still more. “What gave you the idea that such things happen?”

He was so uneasy that Moonpaw was suddenly reluctant to tell him the full truth of what she had been experiencing. “I’m just curious, that’s all,” she replied. “I figured that if medicine cats see spirits at the Moonpool, then surely the spirits could make themselves known to cats in other ways.”

Her words seemed to calm Alderheart’s uneasiness, though Moonpaw still thought he wasn’t entirely comfortable.

“I’m glad to hear you’re just talking about your imagination,” he meowed. “The last time something happened like what you’re describing, it was *not* good. In fact, it was very, very bad. And it’s different from what happens at the Moonpool.”

“What sort of bad thing?” Moonpaw asked.

Alderheart paused, as if he was wondering how to reply. Finally he shook his head. “No, Moonpaw,” he told her. “The less you know about that the better, especially while you’re an apprentice. Put the whole thing out of your mind.”

Moonpaw thought that she would never be able to do that, Alderheart had sounded so ominous. “But if I—” she began.

“No.” Alderheart was never angry, but there was anger in his voice now. “I said, forget it.”

By now Moonpaw was eager to get out of the den. Her innocent questions had obviously roused an unwelcome memory in Alderheart. She was afraid that if she stayed there and kept talking, she would say something to increase his suspicions and give more of herself away than she was ready for right now.

What if the voice in my head is a very bad thing? she asked herself. *What would happen to me if my Clanmates knew?*

“Thanks, Alderheart,” she mewed, ducking her head and trying to sound as if she was satisfied with what the medicine cat had told her. “I’d better go.”

“Goodbye, Moonpaw.” Even while he was speaking, Alderheart had turned back to his task again.

Moonpaw headed out past the bramble screen and froze as she spotted Sunbeam, clearly waiting for her. Guilt swept over her like a hot wind; she knew she should have been ready for training long before this. To her relief, Sunbeam didn’t look angry; instead, her eyes were thoughtful.

“I overheard you talking to Alderheart,” she meowed.

“I didn’t mean to bother him,” Moonpaw protested. “I got out of there as soon as I realized his patience was wearing thin.”

“I’m sure he understood,” Sunbeam reassured her. “And you sounded interested, Moonpaw, really engaged and focused. Much more than you’ve ever been during the warrior training we’ve been doing together.”

“I’m sorry—” Moonpaw began, guilt flooding over her again.

Sunbeam flicked her ears, dismissing her apology. “Maybe you were meant to be a medicine cat and not a warrior after all,” she murmured. “It would explain why you aren’t taking to your warrior training as quickly as some apprentices.”

Moonpaw was taken aback by her mentor's words, feeling a twinge of humiliation at her criticism. *I didn't think I was doing that badly!* Her head felt suddenly heavy, and although she tried to hold it up, it drooped a little.

"I'm sorry I let you down," she mewed. "I didn't mean to. I do try."

While she gazed at the earth floor of the camp, Moonpaw heard Sunbeam giving her a consoling purr. "It's not you who should be apologizing, Moonpaw. It's me, for not asking the question sooner."

"What question?" Moonpaw asked, looking up.

"Whether you think your paws are set on the right path," Sunbeam replied. Her gaze was warm and friendly. "Take it from me," she continued. "I know something about how scary it is to walk a path that isn't right for you. I almost did. . . ."

Moonpaw blinked at her. It was hard to believe that her mentor, so skillful and efficient, could ever have been unsure of herself.

"You know that I was born in ShadowClan?" Sunbeam went on. "I thought I would always live there, but then my Clan was involved in all the trouble with RiverClan a few seasons ago, and my mother . . . Well, let's just say she made some bad choices, and she wanted me to support her. I knew I was doing the right thing when I came here to be a ThunderClan cat and Nightheart's mate. If I had stayed in ShadowClan, I wouldn't have been nearly as happy as I am now."

Moonpaw stood silent for a moment, pondering everything that Sunbeam had said. *Could I be a medicine cat?* When her parents had suggested it, she had been miserable at the thought; she had wanted so much to be a warrior like her denmates. *But it might explain why I hear the voice,* she thought. If she spent more time with Alderheart, she might get more out of him. And she wasn't entirely upset at the thought of leaving her warrior training behind; it wasn't working out as she had expected. *But Alderheart and Jayfeather already questioned me,* she added to herself. *They didn't think I was likely to be a medicine cat.*

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be," she told Sunbeam, "but I'm willing to look into it."

While she was speaking, she spotted Jayfeather emerging from the thorn tunnel with a bundle of herbs in his jaws. Sunbeam had seen him too.

"Hey, Jayfeather!" she called out. "Can I have a word with you?"

Jayfeather headed toward them, his sense of smell guiding him unerringly. "What is it?" he asked, setting the bunch of leaves down carefully at his paws.

"I think ThunderClan might have a new medicine-cat apprentice!" Sunbeam told him, her voice warm with approval. "Of course, we'll need to clear it with Squirrelstar first, but isn't that exciting?"

To Moonpaw's consternation, Jayfeather's only response was a huff of contempt so loud that it brought Alderheart to poke his head out from behind the bramble screen.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

“I think Moonpaw might be destined to be a medicine cat,” Sunbeam explained. “She seems really curious about what you do.”

Alderheart blinked in surprise and stepped fully out of the den to stand looking down at Moonpaw. Her heart began to pound as she looked back at him, only to see nothing of the uneasy expression that had disturbed her in the den. Instead he seemed pleased, but almost as doubtful as Jayfeather.

“What do you think?” he asked the older medicine cat. “She didn’t show any of the signs when we questioned her.”

“If simply being curious about medicine cats and their ways were all it took, then every cat would be a medicine cat,” Jayfeather mewed disdainfully. “We would be the Medicine Cat Clans, not the Warrior Clans.”

Moonpaw stepped forward, her belly churning as she prepared to speak to these two important cats with a decision that might change her life forever. “It’s more than curiosity,” she declared. “I think I *might* be having visions. I’m not sure, but I want to know more about it.”

“So that’s why you were asking about what medicine cats see at the Moonpool just now,” Alderheart purred.

Moonpaw nodded eagerly. “I *really* want to know.”

“What kind of visions?” Jayfeather asked abruptly.

Moonpaw fought back panic. She didn’t know whether she wanted to be a medicine cat, so she had to be careful not to sound as if she had really interesting visions that a real medicine cat might have.

But I have to say something. . . .

“Well?” Jayfeather’s blue eyes were fixed on Moonpaw as if he could see right inside her head.

“I’m not sure . . . ,” she began uncertainly. “When I was in the forest, I saw this huge rabbit—really huge, as big as a dog. I followed it between two trees, and then it vanished. And . . .” She thought frantically. “There was a weird cloud yesterday, moving against the wind.”

Jayfeather snorted. “Those sound more like the kind of tales you tell kits,” he declared. “Not visions. You have a great imagination, Moonpaw.” The last few words didn’t sound like a compliment.

“I don’t know . . . ,” Alderheart mused. “Sometimes medicine-cat abilities take time to show themselves. She might be developing them now. Curiosity is a good sign.”

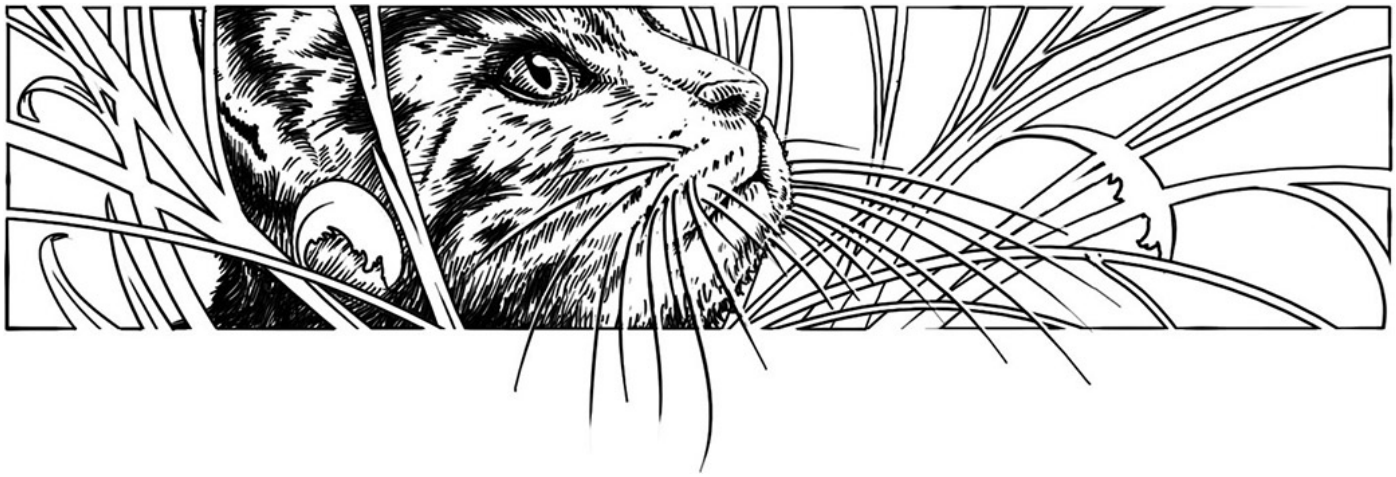
Jayfeather huffed again, picked up his bundle of leaves, and padded past Moonpaw into the den. “Apprentices are curious about many things,” he mumbled around his mouthful. “They have to show a lot more than curiosity if they want to be my apprentice.” He disappeared behind the bramble screen.

“Don’t worry about Jayfeather,” Alderheart assured Moonpaw. “He’s not always this grumpy.” Then he let out a soft *mrrow* of laughter. “Actually, he kind of is,” he added. “But you get used to it after a while.”

“A true Clan cat can get used to *anything*,” Sunbeam agreed, amusement sparkling in her eyes. “Twolegs, dogs, ticks . . . and Jayfeather.”

Moonpaw managed to produce a small purr, trying to join in with Alderheart’s and Sunbeam’s humor. But inside she felt suddenly uncertain. She hadn’t expected Jayfeather to be so dismissive of her.

If that’s how he feels, will he really help me understand myself?



Chapter 7

The sun had not yet appeared, and mist was still rising from the surface of the water as Tawnypelt padded along the shore toward the place where SkyClan's stream spilled out into the lake, where she would meet the rest of the patrol. For once she was hardly aware of the chilly air; instead, her body pulsed with curiosity to find out what the Twolegs were doing at the far side of the Clan territories.

When she reached the stream, Crowfeather, Leafstar, and Bayshine of ThunderClan were already waiting.

"Greetings," Leafstar meowed, dipping her head to Tawnypelt. Her amber eyes were full of purpose, and she was flexing her claws impatiently, as if she was eager to get started. "And thank you for coming to help my Clan."

Tawnypelt nodded in response. "I'm glad to do it, Leafstar." She was slightly surprised that Leafstar had come herself, instead of sending her deputy, Hawkwing. But then, Tawnypelt reflected, Leafstar had always been a paws-on sort of cat; she would want to see for herself what was happening.

"We are all glad." Crowfeather was stamping his paws on the pebbly shore in an effort to keep warm. "Mark my words, if this goes on, it won't be just SkyClan in trouble."

While he was speaking, a loud yowl came from the direction of ShadowClan territory. Tawnypelt turned to see Owlnose bounding along the water's edge. He skidded to a halt in front of Leafstar and ducked his head. "Hi," he panted. "Am I late?"

"No, but it's time we were going," Crowfeather replied.

He took the lead as the patrol headed upstream. Tawnypelt padded along at his shoulder, with Leafstar beside her; Owlnose and Bayshine brought up the rear.

The territory seemed completely deserted. Tawnypelt didn't expect to meet any other SkyClan cats; they were nowhere near the border, and no cat would hunt so close to the poisoned stream. But even the usual rustlings of prey were silent, as if the small woodland creatures realized that something was wrong.

"Is this spooky or what?" Bayshine remarked.

"You try living here," Leafstar responded tartly.

"I can't even hear the roaring noise you say the Twolegs make." Owlnose angled his ears forward and added hopefully, "Do you think that means they've gone away?"

Crowfeather gave a single lash of his tail. "Yeah, and hedgehogs fly."

"The Twoleg noise doesn't start until well after sunrise," Leafstar meowed. "I don't think they get up as early as us cats."

"Lazy bunch," Bayshine muttered.

Tawnypelt sniffed the air and thought she could pick up a trace of something unnatural, but it was so faint that she couldn't be sure. *I certainly wouldn't want to*

drink from this stream, she told herself.

As the patrol journeyed upstream, Tawnypelt became aware of a heavy weight gathering in her gut, a sense of dread focused on whatever lay ahead beyond the SkyClan border. She couldn't imagine what it might be, but all her senses were screaming at her that it was going to be bad for the Clans.

Crowfeather halted when they reached the SkyClan border. "Okay, listen up," he began briskly. "From now on, we're going to be moving away from Clan territory. We have no idea what we're going to find. Stay together, keep all your senses alert, and if you spot something that doesn't seem right, for StarClan's sake tell the rest of us. Got that?"

Every cat, even Leafstar, murmured agreement.

Crowfeather is going to make a fine leader one day, Tawnypelt thought, admiring the WindClan deputy's authority.

Bunched together now, the patrol crossed the border and headed into unknown territory. Before they had traveled many paw steps, Tawnypelt began to pick up a new scent: a heavy, acrid smell that reminded her of Thunderpaths.

"Crowfeather, can you smell that?" she asked.

The dark gray tom nodded. "I think we're getting somewhere."

Before the words were out of his mouth, the patrol rounded a bramble thicket and halted with gasps of astonishment. Every cat was staring at what lay in front of them: a massive blue wall, stretching as far as they could see in both directions, and so many tail-lengths high that they couldn't see anything beyond it. Just ahead of them was a gap at the bottom of the wall where the stream flowed through.

"I think we've found what we're looking for," Crowfeather mewed drily.

For a few heartbeats all the cats could do was stand and stare. It was Leafstar who eventually broke the silence.

"Let's go this way," she suggested, waving her tail toward a rocky knoll with gorse and holly bushes growing between the boulders. "From the top we should be able to see over the wall."

Tawnypelt and the rest of the cats followed her lead, weaving their way through the foliage until they emerged into a clear space at the top. From there they were higher than the top of the wall, and they had a good view of what was going on beyond it.

The first thing Tawnypelt noticed was some large structure rising from the ground in the middle of the walled-off area. It was surrounded by a network of straight, shiny branches with wooden ledges here and there, connected by what looked like thin trees with narrow branches at regular intervals from top to bottom. The walls of what she assumed would be a Twoleg den stood inside the network, but so far it was only a couple of tail-lengths high.

"That's going to be *huge*," Bayshine breathed out.

Tawnypelt exchanged a glance with Crowfeather. He looked just as stunned as she felt. "I can't imagine why Twolegs would need a den as big as this," he murmured.

“Sometimes they build their nests on top of each other,” Tawnypelt responded. “So how many Twolegs could be encroaching on Clan territory?”

“An unthinkable number,” Leafstar commented in a somber tone.

To begin with, Tawnypelt had been so amazed by the sight of the big den that she hadn’t paid much attention to what else was inside the blue wall. Now she saw that all around the den, huge monsters—much bigger than the ones she had seen on the Thunderpaths around the lake—were sleeping, their bright colors glittering in the growing daylight. The ground where they were resting was churned up, the furrowed soil and patches of mud reaching right up to the den.

The stream ran across the enclosed area, curving around and disappearing behind the den. Its banks were bare earth, crumbling into the water, and Tawnypelt wondered whether that could be the reason for the poisoning.

But it’s only soil, she told herself. *That wouldn’t cause prey or cats to get sick. There must be something else.*

Even worse than the churned-up mud, closer to the blue wall there was a wide stretch of earth dotted with tree stumps.

“Look, they’ve been cutting down trees.” Bayshine’s eyes were wide and dismayed, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Why would they do such a thing?”

“Because they can,” Tawnypelt growled, exchanging a dark look with Crowfeather.

Owlnose shook his head in utter confusion. “I still don’t understand *why*. Why do Twolegs want to destroy so much?”

Tawnypelt’s belly churned with sadness and anxiety. “Twolegs just seem intent on expanding their territory,” she replied. “They have no idea that other creatures are living in the territory that they destroy.”

“They can’t even clean up their own messes,” Crowfeather meowed contemptuously. “Look at the jagged scraps of wood among the tree stumps. Any creature could hurt themselves badly on those.”

The anxiety in Tawnypelt’s belly gathered into a hot, roiling lump of anger. She could imagine herself leaping at a Twoleg, raking her claws down its stupid, hairless face. . . . *No.* She took a deep breath. That wasn’t the way. That would only make things worse.

“I wonder if this is connected to what you saw at the Moonpool, Leafstar,” Owlnose mewed after a few moments of silence. “You said there was some disturbance there. Do any of you know what the Twolegs might want with the Moonpool?”

No cat replied, glancing at each other with grunts and shrugs. “Maybe they’re going to make another of their dens there,” Bayshine guessed after a while. “Or maybe they thought they would build this one up there at the Moonpool, but then changed their minds.”

Tawnypelt glanced around at the rest of the patrol, but she could see that none of them had any more clue than she did.

“Maybe it’s only StarClan who can answer that question,” Leafstar suggested. “Though even if they do, will any cat understand their answer?”

While the SkyClan leader was speaking, Tawnypelt heard the roar of a monster, distant at first, then growing rapidly closer. When she thought that it was going to burst out of the trees and hurtle toward them, it stopped. Another monster followed it, then two or three together.

At the same time, a section of the blue wall swung back, and several Twolegs appeared. They all wore bright yellow pelts, with white shells on their heads. They walked over to the monsters beside the den, climbed inside, and did something that woke them up. The monsters began lazily patrolling the area; one bright yellow monster began using a claw at its hindquarters to scoop up chunks of earth. The roaring sound that had disturbed the Clans so much grew until it filled the air.

Tawnypelt couldn’t bear to watch. “It’s time we left,” she meowed.

Crowfeather nodded agreement and led the patrol at a fast lope down from the knoll, then picked up the pace until they were racing downstream with their belly fur brushing the grass. Only when they were well away from the blue wall and what it concealed did he slow to a walk.

“So now we know,” he panted.

“What worries me,” Tawnypelt began when she had caught her breath, “is that the last time the Twolegs started destroying the forest, the Clans had to make the Great Journey. That’s how we came to live here, by the lake.”

Leafstar gave her an anxious look. “Surely we can’t think like that for now.”

“I hope not.” Owlnose was looking really unsettled, his shoulder fur bristling and his tail-tip flicking restlessly to and fro. “I don’t want to have to do that. It hasn’t been all that long since we had to deal with Splashtail, and every cat by the lake knows how bad things get when Clans are fighting over space and territory. If we have to find new territories, will all of that be stirred up again? Will things be worse than ever?”

“I’m not sure that’s going to happen,” Leafstar responded, a leader’s authority in her tone. “But if it does, we’ll just have to make clear to every Clan that the only way we can survive is if we cooperate with each other. I’m sure we can find a way to make things work by the lake,” she finished confidently.

A low growl woke in Crowfeather’s chest as the SkyClan leader spoke. “You weren’t there!” he snapped when she had finished. “That’s not how it went last time. We lost our home, and many cats lost their lives.” He shuddered. “I still dream about it.”

Tawnypelt thought he looked as if he would have liked to say more, but after a moment’s hesitation he quickened his pace to walk ahead of the rest of the patrol, as if he didn’t want to be a part of this conversation anymore.

Maybe he’s thinking of Feathertail. . . . Tawnypelt felt sorry that she had brought up a topic that might remind Crowfeather of the beautiful RiverClan cat he had loved and lost when she gave her life to save his. She wanted to catch up to him and

apologize, but Leafstar, who seemed entirely unoffended by Crowfeather's outburst, was speaking again.

"Twolegs don't seem to patrol or hunt far from their dens," she meowed, her voice warm and reassuring. "They haven't disturbed the Moonpool yet, and it's likely that they'll stay close to this massive den they're building. At least now we know what they're doing."

"Except it still isn't clear what's poisoning the stream," Tawnypelt pointed out.

A shadow of anxiety settled on Leafstar's face. "True," she admitted. "But it must have something to do with this den. Perhaps when the building is finished, all the monsters will go away and things will get back to normal. Maybe we should patrol here every quarter moon, just to keep an eye on things."

"That sounds like a good idea," Tawnypelt meowed.

But even while she agreed with the SkyClan leader, she felt a prickle of uncertainty all through her pads and along her spine. *Leafstar is trying to convince herself,* she thought. *I wish I could be sure that there's nothing to worry about. . . .*

Chapter 8

Overnight the clouds had cleared away, and the sun had already risen above the trees around the SkyClan camp. Leafstar sat in the shade of a clump of bracken and watched as the dawn patrol returned, heading for the warriors' den beneath the spreading branches of the hawthorn bush.

Rootspring, in the lead, padded up to Leafstar and dipped his head. "Everything is quiet," he reported.

"Excellent," Leafstar replied with a nod of acknowledgement. "Now go and get some rest."

Rootspring and his companions had only just vanished into the den when the earliest hunting patrols reappeared, prey dangling from their jaws. There wasn't as much as usual, Leafstar noticed, as they padded across the camp to drop their catch on the fresh-kill pile, but they had brought back enough prey so that every cat could at least eat something.

No cat is full, but no cat is starving*, either,* Leafstar thought with grim satisfaction. *So far.*

"So . . ." Leafstar turned to her deputy, who was sitting beside her at the entrance to her den. "What do you think of my plan?"

Hawkwing paused for a couple of heartbeats before he replied. "I think it's a good plan," he meowed eventually. "We certainly need to get rid of the badger before it has time to settle in. But wouldn't you rather I lead the patrol instead of you?"

Leafstar tried to ignore a prickle of irritation at the doubtful note in her deputy's voice. *Don't you think I'm up to the job?*

"This is a leader's task," she responded, forcing herself to sound good-humored. "You'll have more than your fill of such duties when you're Clan leader. Besides, I need you to guard the camp while I'm away."

She thought she could still discern a dubious look in Hawkwing's yellow eyes, but all he said was, "Of course, Leafstar," with a respectful dip of his head.

Bracing herself, she rose and strode into the center of the camp, with Hawkwing padding along at her shoulder. Leaping up onto the boulder, she let out a loud yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Tallrock for a Clan meeting."

Most of her warriors were already in the clearing, resting after their scanty meal, sharing tongues, or trying to soak up the faint warmth of the sun. They raised their heads as Leafstar spoke, then hauled themselves to their paws and padded over to sit at the foot of the rock. Leafstar suppressed a pang of worry at how lethargic they looked. Only the apprentices seemed to have any energy, scurrying across the camp to sit beside their mentors.

Frecklewish and Fidgetflake emerged from their den and sat down just outside it; Leafstar couldn't help noticing how they exchanged a glance; however much she squinted, she was unable to make out the expression in their eyes, but she was sure they were expecting more bad news.

Maybe this will cheer them up, she thought.

"This is an important day," Leafstar announced loudly, summoning every scrap of confidence inside her. "Today we're going to drive that badger away from our territory."

She paused, waiting for her Clan to cheer, or at least to voice their agreement. Instead she was greeted with silence, her warriors glancing at one another or muttering in one another's ears, too low for Leafstar to catch what they were saying. She peered down at them, trying to read their faces, but except for the cats nearest to her, they were all a blur.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, unable to understand why they seemed so reluctant. "We've known we would have to do this ever since the badger moved in. So what has changed? Are we supposed to let it stay here?"

More silence followed her words. Eventually Reedclaw, a small, pale tabby she-cat, rose to her paws and dipped her head politely. "I'm not sure about fighting a badger," she mewed.

"The badger will be outnumbered," Leafstar pointed out.

Reedclaw nodded but didn't seem reassured. She cast a glance at Hawkwing, as if she was considering asking what he thought, but Hawkwing's face remained impassive. "Even a single badger can inflict terrible damage on cats before they can manage to defeat it," Reedclaw declared at last.

"Reedclaw is right." Gravelnose stood up and moved to stand at his Clanmate's shoulder. "Nectarsong and I first scented the creature near the greenleaf Twolegplace, and I've been back there since. The scent is so strong now, I think there must be more than one badger there."

At his words, a rustle of unease, like wind through the trees, passed through the assembled cats. Almost all of them, Leafstar thought, seemed unsure about the patrol now. Even more of them were looking toward Hawkwing, as if they expected him to speak against Leafstar's plan, but the deputy remained silent.

"Leafstar, you have to think this through," Frecklewish called out. "The last thing we need right now is more injured cats than we can properly care for."

Leafstar felt a knot of anger burning in her belly. *If even my medicine cats don't support me* . . . She let her gaze travel slowly around her gathered warriors and couldn't feel that she recognized them anymore. Back in the gorge, and on their long, hard journey to the lake, she had been able to rely on their courage and determination. Since their arrival here, they had faced terrible challenges, but she had never been aware of the reluctance, even shrinking from duty, that she was sensing now.

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” She let the beginnings of a snarl creep into her voice. “I thought every single one of you would have been willing to fight for SkyClan! It’s bad enough that the Twolegs are building a massive new den for themselves; bad enough that they’re poisoning the stream and sickening more than half the prey on our territory; bad enough that the other Clans, especially ShadowClan, seem unwilling to cooperate and help us. But now SkyClan’s own warriors won’t even *fight* to preserve our own territory? For season upon season we were the only Clan in the gorge. We can survive without help from other Clans. But we must be willing to defend ourselves. What if this badger gets so comfortable, it attracts other badgers? What if what was once SkyClan’s territory becomes the territory of a *badger* Clan? We haven’t lived here by the lake for very long,” she reminded them. “It wouldn’t take much for us to disappear altogether.”

As she was speaking, Leafstar saw that the two apprentices had moved closer to their mentors and were gazing up at her with wide, scared eyes. Some of the younger warriors, too, looked thoroughly spooked. She took a breath and forced herself to stop speculating before panic began to spread through the Clan.

And maybe before Hawkwing decides he needs to stick a paw in. As soon as the snarky thought crossed her mind, Leafstar felt ashamed of herself. Her deputy had been nothing but loyal. *I’m only feeling jealous because the Clan keeps looking to him.*

“We’re going to do this,” she meowed, trying to sound calm and authoritative. “I will lead the patrol. Gravelnose, Kitescratch, Reedclaw, Rootspring, Sparrowpelt, and Wrenflight will come with me. Are there any of my Clanmates who think that seven warriors can’t take down one badger?”

No cat answered her question, but Leafstar was fairly sure that some of them would have told her exactly that, if they had dared. And even with her dimming sight she could discern the relief in the faces of some of the warriors who hadn’t been chosen.

“Leafstar, I’m more than willing to go,” Kitescratch began, rising with a polite dip of his head. “But don’t you think it would be a good idea for the six of us to relax for a while? After all, I did the dawn patrol, and so did Rootspring. And all the others have been out hunting.”

Leafstar shook her head determinedly. “From what I know of badgers,” she explained, “they tend to be more active at night. Now it’s early in the day, so there’s a chance that the badger that is squatting on our territory is asleep. We’ll be able to take it unawares.” She paused, drawing herself up. “We leave now,” she announced.

The cats she had chosen said nothing, only shifted their paws uncomfortably. None of them would meet her gaze.

More forcefully, Leafstar repeated, “We leave now.”

Leafstar crouched in a clump of bracken on the edge of the greenleaf Twolegplace, gazing out at the rocky bank and the dark hole between two boulders where Gravelnose

and Nectarsong had first scented the badger. Her nose twitched and her belly churned at the rank scent that was flowing out of the hole.

That's definitely a badger.

Leafstar had allowed Gravelnose to take the lead across the territory, since he knew where the badger set was. That had been the right decision, she thought. Once or twice on the way, she had been confused, like at the spot where Gravelnose had chosen to leap across the stream. There was a jutting rock that marked the place; had there always been a similar jutting rock farther downstream, where the stream was too wide to leap over safely?

Leafstar shook her head. This wasn't the time to start brooding over her eyesight. Instead she glanced from side to side to make sure that the six cats she had chosen were all in hiding with her, crouching in the same swath of bracken. She could feel their tension and anxiety like a tightness in the air as they gazed at the ominous hole where the StarClan-cursed badger had decided to make its home.

"Okay, every cat listen," she began. "I'll run through the plan one more time. We'll approach the set and take up our positions, staying close to each other. Gravelnose, Kitescratch, and Reedclaw, you'll stay on this side"—she indicated with a twitch of her tail—"and Rootspring, Sparrowpelt, and Wrenflight, you'll be on the other. I'll be in the middle. Once the badger realizes we're here, it'll stick its head out to investigate. That's when we charge and attack. I'm expecting that if we can keep the creature trapped in the hole, it won't be able to defend itself properly against us."

Sparrowpelt nodded when she had finished speaking. "That should definitely work," he meowed.

Leafstar detected a slight easing in her Clanmates' tension: a relaxing of their shoulders and a flattening of their fur. She felt encouraged to see them look a little more confident. *This is one problem that SkyClan* will *be able to solve.*

With Leafstar a tail-length in the lead, the warriors emerged from cover and began to creep slowly toward the set, their belly fur brushing the ground and their paw steps as silent as if they were stalking a squirrel.

As she took up her position, with her warriors on either side of her, Leafstar felt her heart begin to pound. Every moment they waited seemed to drag out into a season.

Rootspring, who was next to his Clan leader, murmured into her ear, "That scent is very strong. I think it's too strong to be coming from only one badger."

Leafstar tilted her head, considering. The badger scent filled the air, swamping all the other forest scents, and she thought she might never get the stink of it out of her pelt. But then, she reflected, every cat knew that a badger's reek was worse than any other creature's, even a fox's.

"No, I think there's only one," she responded at last.

Rootspring gave a tiny shrug and said nothing more.

Eventually, when Leafstar was beginning to wonder if they would have to give up, the badger's blunt snout appeared at the mouth of the set, the white stripe on its head

glimmering in the darkness of the tunnel. Then the badger's whole head poked out; its bright, malignant eyes glared at the cats, and it drew its lips back in a snarl, showing a mouthful of jagged teeth.

Oh, great StarClan! Leafstar felt a pulse of terror pass through her whole body. *I'd forgotten how* big *they are!*

Kitescratch, who was nearest to the entrance on one side, swiped a claw at the badger's face, forcing it to retreat into its hole. At Leafstar's signal the warriors converged on the gap. Kitescratch and Reedclaw, who were closest on the other side, yowled as they thrust their forepaws into the hole. Leafstar could hear their grunts of effort and frustration; she gathered that the badger had retreated too far for them to reach.

Then Kitescratch let out a shriek of pain. "It's biting my leg!"

Reedclaw dived farther in; her movements told Leafstar that she must be lashing out with both forepaws. The badger's grunts of pain told her that at least some of her blows had landed. Meanwhile Kitescratch fought to stop the badger from dragging him farther into the set. Leafstar sprang forward, but the gap was too narrow for her, or any of the others, to get in and help.

At last, after a furious tussle, Kitescratch scrambled backward, his fur torn and blood trickling from his leg. But the badger had followed him out into the open. As soon as it emerged, Reedclaw and Rootspring jumped on top of it. Rootspring balanced on its head, trying to claw at its eyes, but before he could strike, the badger bucked and kicked out, throwing both cats off. They hit the ground with a thump and lay half stunned, with the breath knocked out of them.

Leafstar felt a churning fear in the depths of her belly. *This is all going horribly wrong!* Now the badger had space to move; it was a ferocious fighter, snarling and snapping at the cats as it lumbered this way and that.

"Remember you're SkyClan!" Leafstar called out.

Her exhortation didn't do much good. Her warriors darted up to the badger, slashed at it, then sprang back out of range, but their movements were hesitant, uncoordinated, because Leafstar's plan had never considered the possibility that the badger might leave the set. The badger seemed buoyed by their uncertainty, grunting and growling, lashing out with heavy, blunt claws, driving the cats back. Leafstar met its eyes and felt even more unsettled as she saw not only aggression but confidence in its baleful black gaze.

Then Wrenflight, who was closest to the set, attacking the badger's hindquarters, let out a yowl of pain and fear. Leafstar glanced toward her and saw that the golden tabby she-cat had been set upon by a *second* badger emerging from the hole. It was even larger than the first; Leafstar realized that it must be a male, and the first badger was its mate.

No wonder she seemed so confident, facing off against seven cats. . . . Should I call for a retreat?

With a brief flash of resolve Leafstar pushed away the thought. She was determined to fight for her Clan. Gritting her teeth, she hurled herself into the fight, leaping up at the male badger and trying her best to scratch out his eyes. Although she fell short, unable to land the deadly strike, she did manage to force him backward, toward the set.

Her confidence surged; her seven cats could handle these two badgers.

No, not two badgers—three *badgers!*

Leafstar caught a flicker of movement at the corner of her eye, away to one side. Panic surged through her at the thought of a third badger joining the fight.

She spun around, raising her paw and sliding out her claws to slash at the attacker's ear. But before her blow could land, she felt a cat barreling into her side, striking her off balance so that she staggered and only just managed to stay on her paws.

"No, don't hurt him!" Kitescratch yowled.

Leafstar managed to focus her eyes and saw not a third badger, but the apprentice Starlingpaw. *What in StarClan?* He wasn't supposed to be here. Apprentices would never be called upon to join such a dangerous mission.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

For a heartbeat, all three cats were stunned into stillness. A heartbeat later Kitescratch's cry of pain ripped through the silence. Leafstar whirled to see that the male badger had rounded on Kitescratch, sinking his teeth into the reddish-brown tom's neck. Kitescratch let out another screech and flailed with all four paws, struggling to fight his way clear.

Horror engulfed Leafstar. *We hesitated . . . and that gave the badger the chance to attack.*

Rootspring and Sparrowpelt hurled themselves at the badger, ripping at its thick pelt with their claws and teeth. But as they dragged the badger off, Leafstar heard a horrific tearing sound. Every muscle in her body tightened. She knew what that meant.

"Retreat! Retreat!" she yowled.

All eight cats fled back the way they had come, into the trees beyond the greenleaf Twolegplace. Leafstar was thankful to see that at least Kitescratch was able to run. The snarls and growls of the badgers died away behind them, and Leafstar drew a deep breath, realizing that they were safe.

"Okay, we're clear," she panted. "We can slow down."

But she didn't have much time for relief. Kitescratch had managed to keep up with them in their desperate flight from the set, but as soon as their pace slowed, he staggered and collapsed on his side. Blood was gushing from the wound in his neck.

"Rootspring," Leafstar ordered, "run back to camp and fetch Frecklewish and Fidgetflake. Gravelnose, Sparrowpelt, find some cobweb to staunch the bleeding."

As Rootspring raced off, and the other two cats disappeared into the bushes, Leafstar gazed down at her stricken Clanmate. A stab of horror pierced her heart as she realized that it was too late. The ground was soaked with Kitescratch's blood, the flow

growing more sluggish with every heartbeat. Leafstar could hardly make out the faint rise and fall of his chest.

"He's dying . . . ," she whispered.

Reedclaw's wail of anguish confirmed what Leafstar already knew. Grief and fury surged through Leafstar from ears to tail-tip. She whipped around to confront Starlingpaw.

"What were you thinking?" she demanded. "If you hadn't shown up on a patrol you *weren't supposed to join*, this would never have happened. Who said you could follow us on this dangerous mission?"

Starlingpaw didn't reply; he just stared at the ground, his heartbreak for his father's death in every line of his body.

Through her grief for Kitescratch, Leafstar felt guilt like a massive paw clamping around her heart. "I'm sorry." She had to force out the words. "It wasn't your fault."

I don't want to face the fact that the real fault was my own, she admitted to herself.

Gazing at the stricken apprentice, she realized that an apology could never heal the damage she had already done. It was too late to take back her words, and too late to undo the plan that had ultimately taken Kitescratch's life.

Chapter 9

"Now look, and listen," Jayfeather instructed. He was picking out herbs from the store at the back of the medicine cats' den and laying them out on a flat stone where water trickled down the rock face to form a small pool.

Moonpaw watched intently. This wasn't as exciting as learning to hunt or practicing battle moves with the other apprentices, but she was beginning to question whether that life could be for her. Maybe she was destined to be a medicine cat after all.

"This is tansy." Jayfeather pointed with his paw at the first stem in the row. "See the feathery leaves? Now give it a good sniff so you'll be able to track it down when you go hunting for herbs in the forest."

Stretching her neck forward, Moonpaw inhaled the sharp, clean scent of the tansy. *Hunting for herbs,* she thought, picturing herself stalking through the forest, tracking tansy by its scent, slinking through long grass so she could get close enough to pounce before the herb sensed her presence and flew away. *Mouse-brain!* she scolded herself, stifling a giggle.

"What's the matter with you?" Jayfeather asked.

"Nothing, Jayfeather." Moonpaw tried to sound suitably humble. "Sorry."

Jayfeather gave a disapproving sniff. "Concentrate!" he meowed. "Do you know what we use tansy for?" he asked.

Moonpaw remembered that Daisy in the nursery had suffered from a cough about a moon ago. Alderheart had brought her tansy to chew. "Coughs?" she responded.

"Very good." Jayfeather sounded surprised. "Catmint is best for coughs, but if we can't get catmint, then tansy is a good substitute. We use it for back pain, too. Now, this next herb, this is horsetail. . . ."

He went on describing the different plants and what they were used for, making Moonpaw examine the leaves and give each one a good sniff so she would remember them. Moonpaw gradually became involved in the lesson, admiring the medicine cats even more for how much they had to learn.

Will I ever be as skillful as Jayfeather and Alderheart? And is this really what I'm meant to do?

"Jayfeather, are you ready?" Alderheart poked his head around the bramble screen into the den. "It's time we were leaving for the Moonpool."

Moonpaw's heart gave a little skip of excitement. Ever since she was a kit, she had heard about how the medicine cats met at the Moonpool every half-moon to commune with StarClan. Now she was actually going to go there with them and find out what happened.

And maybe it will help me understand about my voice.

Jayfeather raised his head from the collection of herbs when Alderheart spoke. “Yes, I’m ready,” he responded.

“I’m ready too!” Moonpaw mewed.

Jayfeather swung around and fixed his blind blue gaze on her. “You aren’t coming.”

Moonpaw stared at him, her mouth gaping. “Why not?” she asked.

“Because you’re not a medicine cat,” Jayfeather replied curtly.

Moonpaw’s fur began to bristle with indignation. “I’m a medicine-cat apprentice!”

“No, you’re not.” Jayfeather flicked his tail in annoyance. “You haven’t committed yourself to the way of a medicine cat. And until you do, you won’t set paw anywhere near the Moonpool.”

Moonpaw swung around to where Alderheart still stood waiting beside the bramble screen. “Alderheart, please . . .”

“I’m sorry, Moonpaw.” Alderheart’s voice was kind but firm. “I think Jayfeather is right. You’ve only been training with us for a few days, and that’s far too short a time for you to decide whether this is the right life for you. Maybe at the next half-moon.”

Though she felt angry and miserable, Moonpaw knew that there was no point in arguing any further. Neither of her mentors was on her side. She listened, seething, while Jayfeather gave her his last instructions.

“Go over these herbs one more time,” he told her. “Memorize their shapes and colors and scents; see if you can remember what they’re used for. When you’ve finished, put them away in their proper places.”

Moonpaw drew a breath, trying not to sound mutinous. “Yes, Jayfeather.”

The blind medicine cat paused as if he expected her to argue, then gave her a brusque nod and headed out of the den with Alderheart.

When they were gone, Moonpaw tried to concentrate on the herbs, while also—if she was honest with herself—having a good sulk. She had wanted to go to the Moonpool so very much. She had convinced herself that there she would learn more about her voice, and where it might be coming from, as well as working out whether she really was meant to be a medicine cat. But she was also sensible enough to realize that if she did her work well now, she was more likely to be allowed to go next time.

“This is horsetail,” she murmured to herself, beginning to repeat what she had learned from Jayfeather. “It’s easy to identify, with all those spiky stems. And it’s used to stop wounds being infected. And here next to it is marigold; it’s used for wounds too. And this one . . .” She took a deep sniff. “This is tansy, with those feathery leaves. We use it for coughs if we can’t get catmint. And here’s thyme, with those little leaves—no, the smell’s wrong. What is it?” She crushed one leaf with her paw to release the scent and breathed it in deeply. “I know! It’s watermint, and we use it for bellyache.”

As she went through the herbs, trying to remember what Jayfeather had told her, Moonpaw’s anger faded, and she began to enjoy the challenge he had given her. There was a *lot* to remember about which herbs were used for which problems and where

they were stored in the medicine den. The information seemed to fill her head, and it became all she could think about.

Maybe that's why I haven't heard the voice lately.

Perhaps that had always been the solution, Moonpaw thought. She just needed something to occupy her mind. She began to think that she had been imagining the voice all along.

But then she realized that the sound she imagined when she remembered things like Jayfeather's instructions was different from the voice she used to hear. Her memory of the instructions didn't . . . reverberate within her mind the way that the voice did. That was always similar to a real sound, heard in the real world.

But it's gone now, Moonpaw reflected, *so it must have been imaginary, right?*

Moonpaw tried to ignore these thoughts and return to identifying herbs. She was determined to do a good job and memorize all the textures and scents. When Jayfeather got back and tested her knowledge, she would be able to get every question right.

Once Moonpaw had finished her task and was as sure as she could be that she had identified the herbs properly, she put them away in the store at the back of the den, making sure that each stem went with others of the same kind.

I don't want Jayfeather yowling at me for mixing up his herbs!

By the time all the herbs were stowed away, and the store was tidy, the last of the daylight had faded and Moonpaw groped her way to her nest. With a final thought of what her mentors might be doing at the Moonpool, she sank into sleep.

Moonpaw was sitting on a grassy knoll overlooking the lake. Sunlight glittered on the surface of the water and birds were singing high above in the trees. Best of all, the voice in her head was silent. She took a deep breath of clear, cool air and enjoyed the beauty that was all around her.

The drawn-out wail of a cat startled Moonpaw; glancing around the peaceful scene, she couldn't see where the sound was coming from. More voices joined the first, and as the clamor grew louder, the lakeside view began to break up as if a rock had fallen from the sky and shattered it. The sunlight blinked out, and Moonpaw found herself struggling back to wakefulness in her nest.

She felt as though only heartbeats had passed since she fell asleep, but dawn light was filtering into the den past the brambles, while more yowls of shock and dismay were battering at her ears. She scrambled to her paws, shook off the scraps of bedding from her pelt, and ventured out into the open.

Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were standing outside their den; Moonpaw bounded over to them. "Do you know what's going on?" she asked.

Goldenpaw shook his head. "We just heard this awful screeching."

Shinepaw slid out her claws. "Maybe there's a badger!"

"Or maybe SkyClan is attacking us for prey," Goldenpaw suggested.

Moonpaw's belly lurched at the thought of a battle, whether with a badger or with hostile warriors. "Where's Squirrelstar? Or Ivypool?" she asked.

Several of Moonpaw's Clanmates were clustered around the entrance to the thorn tunnel, but neither the Clan leader nor the deputy was among them. As Moonpaw watched, Cherryfall came staggering into the camp, leaning on Lionblaze's shoulder. The golden warrior looked unsteady on his paws, too, and both cats had tufts of fur torn out of their flanks and haunches. Blood was trickling down from a wound on Cherryfall's shoulder, soaking her ginger pelt.

Oh, no!

For a moment Moonpaw's limbs froze in panic. Here were two wounded cats returning to camp, while Alderheart and Jayfeather still hadn't returned from the Moonpool.

What am I going to do?

Ivypool appeared from the warriors' den and strode across the camp to meet Lionblaze and Cherryfall. "What happened?" she demanded.

Before either cat could reply, two more cats emerged from the tunnel: Alderheart and Jayfeather, back from the half-moon meeting. Relief washed over Moonpaw as if she stood under a cooling waterfall in the heat of greenleaf, and she hurried across the camp, with Goldenpaw and Shinepaw hard on her paws, to find out what this was all about.

"We came across a fox while we were doing the dawn patrol," Lionblaze replied to Ivypool.

"Did you attack it?" Ivypool asked.

The golden tabby tom gave a firm shake of his head.

Jayfeather pushed his way forward to stand beside the wounded cats. "So it attacked you, and Cherryfall got injured," he grumbled. "We get it. Now bring Cherryfall into the medicine den. Moonpaw, come with us. I'll need your help."

Feeling a warm tingle that Jayfeather had asked for her, Moonpaw followed him and the wounded warriors across the camp to the den. Once there, she headed straight for the herb stores, took out some horsetail and began chewing it up.

Jayfeather turned around from where he was licking Cherryfall's shoulder. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Chewing up horsetail," Moonpaw mumbled around her mouthful of stems. "For Cherryfall's wound."

Jayfeather nodded. "Good job," he grunted.

At first Jayfeather's words made no sense to Moonpaw. It took a couple of heartbeats for her to work out what he had actually said. When she finally understood, she wanted to jump up and down, but she controlled herself. *Wow! Jayfeather praised me!*

When she had finished the poultice and set it down beside Cherryfall, she slipped out of the den again. Alderheart was checking Lionblaze for wounds.

“Just a scratch or two,” the medicine cat meowed at last. “You’ll be fine. Keep them clean, and if any of them start throbbing or feeling warm, come and see us.”

Squirrelstar had joined Ivypool and stepped forward once Alderheart had finished. “So, tell us what happened,” she ordered.

“Cherryfall and I were doing the dawn patrol,” Lionblaze began. “We weren’t hunting, but a squirrel practically ran into our paws, so we caught it. We were just thanking StarClan for the prey when a fox ambled across the SkyClan border into our territory. We kept our distance, hoping it would pass by, but it caught our scent and headed for us, growling.”

“Why didn’t you run?” Ivypool asked.

Lionblaze hesitated, looking partly sheepish, partly angry. “I know it would have been sensible to run,” he admitted. “But my first reaction was to think it was better to let the fox know it wouldn’t be settling in on our territory.”

Squirrelstar tilted her head thoughtfully. “So the fox attacked?”

“Neither I nor Cherryfall wanted to fight,” Lionblaze insisted. “But the fox seemed determined. Maybe it wanted the squirrel. So we fought, but the fox was big and strong and wild, and well . . . Cherryfall came out of it with a bad wound.”

Before any cat could respond, Moonpaw heard Jayfeather’s voice from inside the den. “Moonpaw! Come here!”

She turned to head back into the den, thinking how dangerous everything was outside the camp. As a medicine cat, she wouldn’t be exposed to those dangers. But she would be expected to treat all the emergencies that came in.

That’s so important! Do I want that kind of pressure?

Her thoughts ran on while she fetched cobweb and dabbed it on when Jayfeather had the poultice in place.

“That feels better already,” Cherryfall meowed. “Thanks, Jayfeather.”

“You should go back to your den and rest,” Jayfeather responded. “No more duties today, and don’t even think about leaving camp. Come and see me in the morning.”

Moonpaw admired the authority in his tone; she couldn’t imagine herself speaking like that to a wounded cat.

Will this happen often? she asked herself. *Wounded Clanmates needing my help?*

While Cherryfall rested in the warriors’ den, Moonpaw’s mentors kept her busy for the rest of the day. When she was settling down in her nest, already drifting into sleep, she thought she heard a voice, though she couldn’t make out the words. She half sat up. “Is that some cat coming for treatment?” she mumbled.

Jayfeather and Alderheart, who were also heading for their nests, stopped and stared at her. “There’s no cat approaching the den,” Alderheart told her.

“Sorry.” Moonpaw wasn’t about to explain about hearing a voice. “I thought I heard a cat, but it was probably just the wind.”

To her relief, neither of her mentors questioned her further. She curled up in her nest and tried to sleep, but the voice returned, and this time she could hear it clearly.

You're lost, it mewed.

Moonpaw just managed to stop herself from answering aloud. *No, I'm not. I know where I am,* she thought instead.

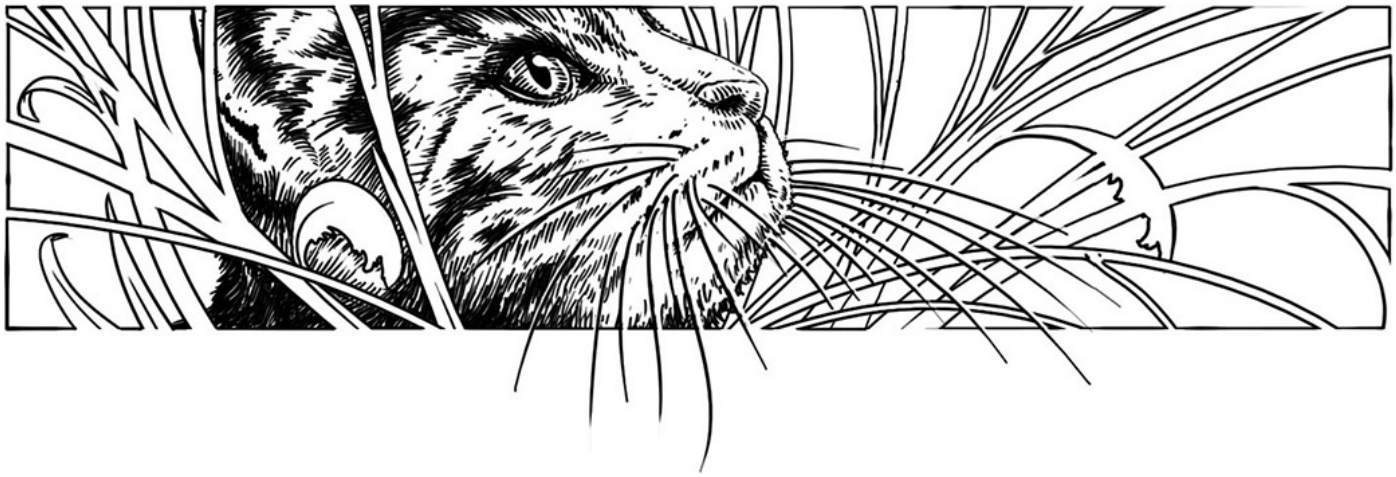
The voice in Moonpaw's head replied directly, in a tone that sounded at once familiar, as if one of her kin were speaking, and sinister, as if it came from an enemy.

No, you don't. You're walking the wrong path. This is not who you are supposed to be.

Moonpaw felt her heart sink. She had hoped that becoming a medicine cat would solve her problem and that she would never hear the voice again. But here it was, and now it was trying to decide her future for her.

You don't get to tell me what to do, she responded.

Not caring what the voice might reply, Moonpaw shut her eyes tight and tried to ignore it. Disappointment surged over her; she had been so certain that the voice had left now that she was working as a medicine cat. But one thing was certain: she, not the voice, would decide what her future in her Clan would be.



Chapter 10

Sadness enveloped Tawnypelt like a dark cloud as she padded across the camp to join the crowd in the center. All the cats of ShadowClan—except for two—were gathered there, glancing awkwardly at one another and exchanging subdued murmurs. Birchfeather stood in the center of the group, speaking quietly first to one cat, then another. He was making his farewells, because this was the day he would leave his birth Clan for good, going to SkyClan to be with Ridgeglow.

"She'll get bored with you soon," Firbark teased him. "She'll send you back home."

Tawnypelt, halting close by, could tell there was sadness beneath the young warrior's mocking voice. She suspected Firbark was hoping that Birchfeather would be sent home. The whole Clan was sad that he was leaving.

The two cats missing from the group were Tigerheart and Dovewing, who were still in the leader's den. The sun was mounting to sunhigh, and still they hadn't emerged.

Birchfeather glanced at Tawnypelt, a stricken look in his eyes. "Do you really think they're not going to come say goodbye?" he asked.

"Of course they will," Tawnypelt insisted.

But as the moments dragged by, it became clear that they weren't going to. Tawnypelt's heart ached for everyone, parents and kit alike, but she couldn't help but feel annoyed that Dovewing and Tigerstar couldn't put their hurt feelings aside and say a proper goodbye to their kit. When Rowankit had died of greencough, her son and his mate had begun to hold on to their other kits more tightly. But Birchfeather didn't understand that their stubbornness came from a deep hurt. He knew only that he had fallen in love, and his parents didn't wish him happiness.

I'm not going to put up with this, she thought at last. "Wait here," she told Birchfeather.

She strode across the camp and burst straight into the leader's den without asking permission. "What in StarClan's name do you think you're doing, Tigerstar?" she demanded. "Aren't you going to wish your son well?"

Tigerstar and Dovewing were curled up together with Dovewing's head on her mate's shoulder, and his tail wrapped protectively around her. The Clan leader didn't even turn his head as he replied to Tawnypelt. "Rowankit died, and Birchfeather is leaving us, and there's nothing more to say. We can't pretend we're happy to lose him."

"I can understand why this hurts," Tawnypelt responded. "I know how it feels to lose a kit. But Birchfeather doesn't understand that pain. Are you really content to let him leave, thinking that you don't love him?"

Tigerstar shook his head. "It's not in doubt that I love my son," he meowed. "That's obvious to every cat."

“It’s not obvious to Birchfeather,” Tawnypelt retorted. “That poor young tom is standing out there, wondering why his parents don’t care to wish him well on his journey to SkyClan.”

Tigerstar shook his head. “Why don’t you try to join SkyClan, Tawnypelt, if you think it’s such a good thing for Birchfeather to go?”

“What do you mean by that?” Tawnypelt asked.

Finally lifting his head, Tigerstar stared her straight in the eyes. “You seemed very eager to get Birchfeather out of ShadowClan,” he explained. “All the support you gave him!”

It took a massive effort for Tawnypelt to hide the shock and hurt that throbbed through her at her son’s words. “I was only doing what I thought was the right thing for Birchfeather,” she explained calmly. “Of course I don’t want him to go. When he first told me that he and Ridgeglow were in love, I assumed that he would invite her to join him here. I never dreamed he was planning to leave. And besides, it’s not like Birchfeather’s parents can criticize him for falling for a cat outside his own Clan, is it?” she added, with an edge to her voice.

Tigerstar and Dovewing turned their heads to gaze into each other’s eyes, as if they were having a silent conversation. Seasons before, when they had fallen in love, Dovewing had been a ThunderClan cat. And that was long before the warrior code had been changed to allow warriors to switch Clans. What they had gone through to be together had been far more devastating than what Birchfeather was doing now.

Eventually both cats rose to their paws and padded out of the leader’s den. Tawnypelt followed as they headed toward Birchfeather. The young warrior was now surrounded by his siblings, Lightleap, Pouncestep, and Shadowsight. Lightleap rubbed her cheek against his as she purred a sad farewell.

Tigerstar dipped his head and spoke to his son. “Goodbye, Birchfeather. I hope StarClan will be with you in your new life.”

“I wish you good luck with your three tasks,” Dovewing meowed.

Birchfeather’s eyes had lit up when he saw his parents approaching, but the light died at their formal bearing and stilted tone; they sounded almost as if they were addressing cats at a Gathering. Tawnypelt felt uncomfortable watching the young tom as he hesitated, as if he was waiting for his parents to say something affectionate. *They love you,* she wanted to assure him. *They just don’t know how to show it.* When at last it was clear that nothing more loving would come, he ducked his head awkwardly.

“I’ll remember all you taught me in ShadowClan,” he mumbled. Glancing around at the rest of his Clanmates, he wished them a quick goodbye and turned at last to Tawnypelt. “Will you walk with me to the border?” he asked.

“Of course I will.” Tawnypelt had hoped he would ask that and was touched by the note of pleading in his voice. *He’s entitled to support from his kin.* When she replied, she tried to instill into her tone all the warmth that his parents had denied him. “Let’s go.”

Tigerstar and Dovewing said no more, and Birchfeather pushed his way through the brambles that surrounded the camp, with Tawnypelt a pace behind.

"How do you feel?" Tawnypelt asked once they had left the ShadowClan camp.

Birchfeather shrugged uneasily. "I was starting to have second thoughts," he admitted, "until my parents came out to speak to me. They didn't sound all that warm, but at least now I know that they don't hate me."

"I'm glad they came to speak to you," Tawnypelt responded. "And you need to realize that they're behaving this way because they love you so much. They can't bear to see you leave."

"I just wish they supported me," Birchfeather meowed.

"Maybe that's asking too much," Tawnypelt told him. "But you don't ever need your parents' approval for your happiness. You must follow your heart, Birchfeather, no matter what any of your kin say."

Birchfeather halted and turned toward Tawnypelt, his eyes wide. "I'm really going to miss you," he mewed.

"We don't have to miss each other all that much," Tawnypelt assured him, padding on through the dark pines. "We'll see each other at Gatherings."

Birchfeather nodded. "Do you think we might find time to meet each other outside of Gatherings?" he asked.

For a heartbeat Tawnypelt imagined that the chilly forest was flooded with sunshine at the thought that her young kin valued her so much. "Of course we can," she promised. *I'll be glad for the chance to keep an eye on you,* she thought silently, and added aloud, "I'm sure Tigerstar and Dovewing will like to hear how you're doing."

Birchfeather blinked at her, opened his jaws to speak, then closed them again. Tawnypelt guessed he didn't share her belief that his parents would be interested to hear about him.

The two cats emerged from the trees and padded down the slope that led to the edge of the lake. The air was full of the mingled scents of border markers: ShadowClan and SkyClan.

"I guess this is it," Birchfeather meowed, halting a tail-length away from where the lake water lapped over the pebbles. "Thanks for everything, Tawnypelt. You've been great."

Once again the sensation of warm sunlight swept over Tawnypelt. Her chest felt stuffed with everything she wanted to say, but she couldn't find the words. "I'm sure your tasks will go well," she murmured, touching her nose to his ear. "And may StarClan light your path."

"And yours, Tawnypelt," Birchfeather responded.

He dipped his head to her in deepest respect. Her heart aching, Tawnypelt backed away and then turned to pass between the trees, leaving Birchfeather on the border to wait for a patrol.

Soon he would be SkyClan.

The moon was still up, casting dark shadows across the forest floor, as Tawnypelt retraced the path she had trodden with Birchfeather the day before. She could pick up faint traces of his scent as she left the trees behind her and padded down to the lake where they had parted.

The first hint of dawn was creeping into the sky; Tawnypelt wasn't surprised that she was the first cat to arrive at the meeting place. *I could have stayed a bit longer in my nest,* she thought, shivering in the dawn chill. She gazed along the lakeshore in both directions, but she couldn't see any other cats. Then she shrugged and sat down to give herself a thorough grooming.

At the half-moon meeting, the medicine cats had seen more evidence of Twoleg activity at the Moonpool, but at night it was hard to see exactly what was going on. The Clan leaders had decided that the patrol that had investigated the Twoleg building outside the SkyClan border should go out again, and this time they had permission to take a look at the Moonpool as well.

"It's going to be a long day," Tawnypelt muttered to herself as she licked a forepaw and rubbed it vigorously over her face. "I just hope we'll get the information we need to keep the Clans safe."

Before long, Owlnose joined her, yawning so hard he could hardly manage to give her a greeting. Bayshine and Crowfeather arrived together a few heartbeats later, both of them looking brisk and ready for action.

"So we're just waiting for Leafstar," Crowfeather meowed when he had greeted the others. He peered up the slope leading to the undergrowth that edged the forest on SkyClan territory and gave the air a good sniff. "Hmmm . . . I can smell a cat, but it's not Leafstar."

He had hardly finished speaking when the undergrowth parted and a cat emerged: a young black-and-white she-cat Tawnypelt had seen once or twice at Gatherings. She had to think for a moment before she remembered her name: Palesky.

"Greetings," the newcomer mewed. "I'm here instead of Leafstar."

Tawnypelt expected Palesky to explain why she had come instead of her leader, but after a couple of heartbeats she realized that there wouldn't be an explanation. "Is Leafstar okay?" she asked.

"Leafstar is fine," Palesky snapped, and clamped her jaws together, showing that she wouldn't say any more.

Tawnypelt exchanged a glance with Crowfeather and saw that the WindClan warrior looked just as intrigued as she was. *Something is going on in SkyClan, for sure.*

"Is every cat ready?" Palesky asked, gazing around at the other members of the patrol.

"We were just waiting for you," Crowfeather responded, his tone dry. "So this is what we'll do," he continued, naturally taking the position of leader. "We need to check out the Moonpool and see what the Twolegs are doing there, and then we'll head back

for another look at that Twoleg den outside SkyClan territory. Last time we didn't find out what was poisoning the SkyClan stream, so let's make that a priority this time."

Bayshine let out a mock groan. "Such a long journey! My paws will fall off!"

"Too bad," Crowfeather mewed unsympathetically, though Tawnypelt caught a glint of amusement in his blue eyes. "Let's go."

He led the way along the water's edge, across SkyClan and ThunderClan territory, then turned to follow the stream that marked the border between ThunderClan and WindClan. "Keep a lookout for prey," he instructed the others. "We won't have time to stop and hunt, but if we come across anything, we won't ignore it."

"I don't understand why we're bothering with this patrol," Palesky complained as they trekked on into the hills. "From all I've heard, there's no way we can stop the Twolegs from doing what they want. We can't destroy this den they're building, right?"

"We still need to know about it," Tawnypelt pointed out, suppressing an impulse to snap at the young cat. "Or how will we know whether we ought to do anything?"

"Well, I agree with Palesky," Owlnose meowed.

"So do I." Bayshine gave a vigorous nod. "Look, please don't mention this to our Clan leaders, but it does feel like we're wasting a whole day to do what? Go stare at some Twolegs?"

"You weren't around when the Clans had to make the Great Journey." There was an ominous note in Crowfeather's voice, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. "It was a terrible time, and no cat who still remembers it wants to go through something like that again. Yes, it may seem pointless now," he continued, "but if doing this helps the Clans know what our best options are, it could save many lives, young and old."

"I don't expect the Clans will make another Great Journey," Owlnose meowed, clearly trying hard to sound confident and unbothered. "Too much blood has been shed to draw up the borders we have now. And we've lived beside the lake for so many seasons. I don't think we'd find it easy to adjust to new territory."

"The Clans lived in the old forest territories for season upon season," Tawnypelt pointed out, doing her best to hide how irritated she was by the younger cat's complacency. "Far longer than we've lived here by the lake. We made the adjustment then; I'm sure we could do it again."

I hope we won't have to, she added to herself.

The sun was well above the horizon by the time the cats reached the bottom of the slope that led up to the Moonpool hollow. A shiver passed through Tawnypelt's fur as she thought of trespassing on this special place, where only medicine cats and sometimes Clan leaders were allowed to go.

"Well, we won't discover anything standing here staring at our paws," Crowfeather meowed crisply. "We need to get closer if we're going to see the stuff Leafstar was talking about."

“Yeah, sure, I’m fine with all this,” Owlnose grumbled with a sarcastic edge to his voice. “It’s not like we have hunting or border patrols to take care of.”

Tawnypelt expected a caustic response from Crowfeather, whose tongue could scorch the whiskers off a complainer better than almost any cat in all the Clans. But the WindClan deputy was silent.

I wonder what he has on his mind, Tawnypelt thought.

Taking the lead once again, Crowfeather leaped up the rocky slope and pushed his way through the line of bushes to stand on the edge of the hollow. Tawnypelt and the rest of the patrol followed him.

On the few occasions Tawnypelt had been allowed here, she had been overwhelmed by the beauty of the waterfall as it tumbled down the cliff face, throwing up foam, and the Moonpool itself, glittering now in the sunlight. For a couple of heartbeats, a sense of immense privilege swept over her, that she was here, seeing this.

Crowfeather’s harsh voice startled her out of her thoughts. “Leafstar was right. Just look at it!”

Distracted from the wonder of the place, Tawnypelt saw the brightly colored smears that the SkyClan leader had mentioned, along with a heap of hard, shiny stuff a few tail-lengths farther along the top of the hollow. There were weird things that looked like rocks, too, but all the same size and shape, and covered in odd brownish-gray pelts.

Tawnypelt padded along to the heap and gave a sniff; she picked up the familiar, stale smell of Twolegs, and the hard, shiny stuff had a scent that vaguely reminded her of monsters, but the musty scent of the weird rocks was completely new to her.

Tentatively she reached out a paw and touched one; it felt a bit like dry, fallen leaves. Sliding out her claws, she dragged them across the pelt, which tore away easily. Gray, powdery stuff trickled out of it. Tawnypelt leaped back as the musty smell billowed out and enveloped her.

Digging her claws into the grass to clean the gray powder off them—*No way am I licking that!*—Tawnypelt turned back to the hollow. The first thing she noticed was that Twolegs had cut regular chunks out of the slope, making it easier to head straight down to the pool instead of following the spiral path. At one point the cut-outs crossed the path, obliterating the paw steps of the ancient cats who had visited this place more seasons ago than any cat could count.

Suppressing a shudder, Tawnypelt spotted Crowfeather standing at the bottom of the path, staring at the Moonpool. He seemed wary of disrespecting the place by approaching any closer. She bounded down to join him, leaping over the new cutting and avoiding the bright marks that were smeared over the path itself.

Tawnypelt could sense Crowfeather’s tension as she halted beside him; his limbs were stiff, his ears laid back and every hair on his pelt beginning to bristle.

“You’ve seen that?” Crowfeather gestured with his tail at the pile of Twoleg trash and the weird rocks. “They’re really *here*, aren’t they?”

Tawnypelt nodded. “They are.”

“As much as I’d like to believe otherwise,” Crowfeather continued, “it certainly looks like the Twolegs have something planned for the Moonpool.” He turned his head to gaze at Tawnypelt, and she saw the apprehension in his eyes. “I don’t mind admitting,” he added, “it terrifies me.”

Tawnypelt knew how hard it must have been for a cat like Crowfeather to speak those words. “I know,” she agreed. “I have a terrible feeling about this.”

Turning away from the pool, Tawnypelt and Crowfeather trekked back up the spiral path to where the other members of the patrol were waiting. Meeting their stares, Tawnypelt realized that the horror that she shared with Crowfeather must be clear on their faces—and just as clearly, the rest of the cats did not understand it.

“What?” she snapped, speaking before the blunter Crowfeather could get a word in. “The Moonpool is essential to our existence. It’s what gives the Clans our link to our wise ancestors who walk among the stars. Without it, we could very well be lost. And there are signs of Twolegs all over it,” she added, interrupting Palesky, who seemed about to speak. “This can’t be good news.”

The other cats glanced at one another—curious, but clearly not as concerned as Tawnypelt and Crowfeather. “Can we get on with it, then?” Bayshine asked. “It’s nearly sunhigh.”

With Crowfeather in the lead again, the cats trekked across the moor, veering into a new direction that would bring them back to the Clan territories near the place where Twolegs were building the big den.

Sunhigh was past when suddenly a rabbit started up from a tussock of grass almost under Crowfeather’s paws. It fled with Crowfeather giving chase. Both prey and pursuer disappeared over a rocky hillock; a heartbeat later Tawnypelt heard a high-pitched scream, abruptly cut off, and Crowfeather reappeared with the limp body of the rabbit dangling from his jaws.

“Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” he mewed as he set it down.

Tawnypelt stifled a *mrrow* of laughter at his smug look. “Great catch, Crowfeather,” she murmured.

The rabbit was plump and juicy, and there was plenty to share among the five cats. When they had all eaten as much as they wanted, they continued their journey with a spring in their step.

Eventually they climbed to the top of a rise and found that they were looking down on the blue-walled enclosure where the Twoleg den was rising from the ground. The Twolegs were at work, even more of them than the last time the cats had visited, all wearing bright yellow pelts with white shells on their heads. There were more monsters around the place, too, obediently carrying Twolegs here and there. Even up on the hillside, the cats could hear their roaring.

“Is this exactly the same as last time?” Palesky asked.

“I think so,” Owlnose replied. “There are more Twolegs, but then, it’s later in the day.”

“That’s good enough for me. If we can’t learn any more, I’m going back to camp.” Palesky sounded pleased to have found a reason to leave. “See you around.”

She ran down the hillside, skirted the blue wall, and disappeared among the trees on the way to SkyClan territory.

Owlnose watched her go, then turned to the others. “I think I’ll go, too,” he meowed. “RiverClan is way over on the other side of the lake, and I’d like to get back before dark.”

“I’ll come with you.” Bayshine took a last glance at the scene below. “I don’t think there’s much more to be learned here.”

Both cats headed down the hill and, like Palesky, vanished among the trees.

As they left, Tawnypelt bit back a harsh comment. It wasn’t for her to tell cats of other Clans what to do. But she couldn’t help thinking that there had to be far more to discover, if only they could get closer to the area inside the blue wall.

Resigned, she turned to Crowfeather. “Are you going back to WindClan?” she asked.

“Soon,” the dark gray tom replied. “But I think we should have a closer look first. We didn’t trek all this way across the moor to go home without anything to report.”

Tawnypelt nodded in agreement, surprised and pleased at the WindClan cat’s reaction. “You’re right,” she meowed. “I’ll come with you.”

Crowfeather headed down the hill with Tawnypelt following. They moved more cautiously than the rest of the patrol who had left earlier, taking advantage of every bit of cover behind rocks or gorse bushes. The roaring and crashing sounds from inside the blue wall grew louder with every paw step.

Maybe the cats who left had the right idea, Tawnypelt thought, repressing a shudder.

As they drew close to the blue wall, Tawnypelt heard another, too-familiar noise, one that froze her paws to the ground: a flurry of barking that rang out clearly above the noise of the Twolegs. Glancing at Crowfeather, she saw that his ears were erect and his shoulder fur was bristling up.

“Where . . . ?” he muttered.

At the same moment Tawnypelt spotted an approaching monster, which bounced over the rough ground until it halted only a few fox-lengths from where she and Crowfeather were crouching. A huge dog was standing in an open section in the back, and as soon as the monster slowed to a stop, it leaped out and hurled itself straight at the cats.

“Run!” Crowfeather screeched.

Instinctively Tawnypelt broke away from the WindClan tom, running in a different direction, hoping to confuse the dog. But it was fast, its loping strides eating up the ground, and there were no trees near enough for safety. It was close on Crowfeather’s

paws, its jaws parting, ready to sink its teeth into his hindquarters. There was only one place where Tawnypelt thought they could find refuge.

"Inside the wall!" she yowled.

Crowfeather heard her and veered away, gaining a couple of vital tail-lengths on his pursuer. Just ahead, a section of the blue wall had been pulled back, leaving a gap through which Tawnypelt could flee, followed by Crowfeather and the dog.

Tawnypelt's ears were filled with the sound of monsters and surprised yowls from the Twolegs. The vicious snarling from the dog was terrifyingly close.

"Up there!" she gasped, angling her ears at the half-built Twoleg den.

Crowfeather leaped onto the hindquarters of a huge yellow monster, and from there onto one of the wooden ledges supported by the shiny branches the cats had seen on their first visit. Tawnypelt jumped up after him.

"I don't think the dog can chase us up here," she panted.

"Yeah, they're terrible climbers," Crowfeather agreed.

"All the same, I think we should climb higher," Tawnypelt continued. "We've got the advantage, so we should use it!"

This time she led the way up one of the thin trees; their regular branches made excellent paw holds. After scrambling onto the next ledge, she paused to catch her breath and looked down toward the ground. A pair of Twolegs were grappling with the dog, pulling it away from the structure even while it went on barking.

Crowfeather joined her a couple of heartbeats later, and the two cats stood gazing at each other, wide-eyed and breathing heavily.

"That was close!" Crowfeather mewed, and they allowed themselves a *mrrow* of laughter.

"Just for a moment I thought we were in real trouble," Tawnypelt admitted.

"You could have fooled me," Crowfeather told her, admiration in his voice. "That was brave, the way you coped with that StarClan-cursed dog. And you were really clever to think of climbing up here. Even though I can't wait to get down," he added with a wry twist of his mouth.

Tawnypelt had to glance away from him, her face growing hot in response to his praise. *Am I . . .* feeling *something for Crowfeather all of a sudden? Oh, no—no,* she scolded herself. *That's silly.*

She wasn't some lovelorn youngster like Birchfeather. She was a senior warrior, and far too old to think about switching Clans. And Crowfeather was . . . Crowfeather. They had known each other forever, since the journey to the sun-drown-water, so long ago. There had never been anything between them.

No . . . No!

When Tawnypelt dared to look back at Crowfeather, she saw that he had turned away from her and padded to the edge of the wooden ledge. Joining him, she found that from here they had a good view of the surrounding territory and the far side of the area inside the blue wall.

The stream flowed through another hole in the wall and ran around the half-built den to leave through the gap the cats had seen on their first patrol. And at the point nearest the den . . .

"Great StarClan! Look at that!" Crowfeather exclaimed.

Tawnypelt followed his gaze to see the stream choked with a pile of Twoleg trash, heaped up on both banks and spilling down into the water. Some kind of dark liquid was washing into the current. A stench rose up, invading Tawnypelt's scent glands until she gagged and barely stopped herself from vomiting.

A thrill of excitement and dread pierced Tawnypelt from ears to tail-tip. "This is what is sickening cats and prey." Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "Leafstar was right."

And if the Twolegs are capable of destroying the stream, what else could they destroy?

Chapter 11

Uneven light dappled the SkyClan camp as the moon struggled to shine in a sky filled with drifting clouds. Leafstar was with the rest of her Clan, gathered in a circle as they sat vigil for Kitescratch. The young tom's body had lain throughout the day in the center of the camp, visible evidence of the guilt Leafstar could not escape.

She was almost glad of the darkness and her own failing eyesight, because it saved her from clearly seeing the heartbroken expressions on the faces of Kitescratch's mother and father, Reedclaw and Quailfeather; his sister, Turtlecrawl; his mate, Needleclaw; and his two newly-apprenticed kits, Robinpaw and Starlingpaw.

The whole Clan had been stunned by the announcement of Kitescratch's death. Leafstar tried to forget the appalling silence that had greeted her when she told them that he had been killed by a badger, especially when so many of her Clanmates had been doubtful about her plan to drive the creature off. The patrol she had led hadn't even succeeded in doing that.

Leafstar kept replaying in her mind the moment when Starlingpaw's sudden arrival had distracted the warriors and given the male badger the opportunity to strike. She wished with all her heart that the young apprentice hadn't been so curious and ill-disciplined.

But I was still too hard on him.

Leafstar knew that Starlingpaw must be feeling unbearably guilty about his father's death, and she didn't need to add to it. Besides, she knew she couldn't lay all the blame on the apprentice's shoulders. She should have recognized that he wasn't a badger, just as the other warriors had.

Now, struggling with so much pain, she felt an intense weariness threaten to overwhelm her. Her head and her eyes felt heavy. . . .

Leafstar padded along the top of the gorge, enjoying the feeling of lush growth beneath her pads. Sharpclaw and Ebonyclaw followed in her paw steps; their jaws were full of prey, while Leafstar herself was carrying a bundle of herbs she had collected for Echosong. The sharp scent of their juices was clean in her nostrils.

Her whole being was filled with contentment. This, the gorge and its surrounding territory, was her home. She hadn't been born into Clan life, she hadn't even known of the Clans as a loner, but now there was nowhere she would rather be.

I never, ever want to leave this place.

Suddenly Leafstar found herself outside Echosong's cave, setting down the herbs she had gathered. She couldn't remember having climbed down the cliff face.

"Did I make a mistake, taking us away from the gorge?" she asked Echosong.

Echosong raised her eyes to meet Leafstar's, but said nothing.

Leafstar's head swirled, and she felt as if she was going to faint. She was looking at the gorge, at the familiar reddish cliffs and the river flowing along the bottom, but at the same time she knew that this was *not* where SkyClan lived now.

Confusion tugged at her mind. She turned to Ebonyclaw, who was standing beside her, and asked, "Are you a kittypet now?"

A stir of movement jerked Leafstar into wakefulness. She sat up, giving her shoulder fur a swift lick, hoping that none of her Clanmates at the vigil noticed that she had fallen asleep.

Dawn light was seeping into the sky; Frecklewish and Fidgetflake had returned from the half-moon meeting, ready to end the vigil. Beside Kitescratch's head, Frecklewish had risen to her paws to speak the ritual words.

"May StarClan light your path, Kitescratch. May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep."

Taking out the body for burial was the duty of the elders, but at this time the only SkyClan elder was Fallowfern, so Quailfeather and Kitescratch's mate, Needleclaw, stepped up to help her. They raised Kitescratch's body and paced solemnly out of the camp.

As soon as they had left, the circle broke up. Hawkwing began assigning cats to the dawn patrol and hunting patrols. Leafstar rose on shaky legs, wanting nothing more than to curl up in her den, but before she could take a couple of paw steps, she was confronted by Reedclaw, her face distorted in fury.

"How *dare* you sleep through Kitescratch's vigil?" she demanded. "Don't try to deny it," she added as Leafstar struggled to protest. "I saw you, snoring away there!"

Someone did notice, Leafstar thought, cringing inwardly. *And the last cat I would have wanted to see* . . . "I know, and I'm sorry," she meowed. "I'm furious with myself for drifting off, and I didn't mean any disrespect. It's just that I'm exhausted after . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Reedclaw glared at her Clan leader. "Oh, you're *tired*?" she sneered. "After that mouse-brained quest into badger territory? Kitescratch didn't come home!"

Her words pierced Leafstar to the heart. Although the pale brown tabby she-cat was small, her righteous anger and her heartbreak made her seem as big as the badger. Briefly, Leafstar thought that Reedclaw might lash out at her, until Hawkwing stepped in between the two of them.

"This isn't honoring Kitescratch," he reminded them gently.

Reedclaw glared at Leafstar for a moment longer, then turned and stalked away toward the warriors' den. A group of Reedclaw's kin and other warriors gathered around her.

As Leafstar watched her go, her guilt felt like a crushing weight pressing down on her head and back, as if a boulder had fallen on top of her.

“It wasn’t your fault that Kitescratch died.” A cat spoke at her shoulder; turning, Leafstar saw that it was her son Harrybrook, his eyes warm with sympathy. “You can’t take on all that guilt,” he continued. “It won’t do any good.”

“I’m Clan leader,” Leafstar sighed. “And I was the cat who insisted on going to drive off the badgers, even though some of my warriors weren’t convinced. It will take a while before I can shake off the feeling of responsibility.”

“The other cats will get over it eventually,” Harrybrook mewed comfortingly.

“I’m not sure they will get over this,” Leafstar responded. “Kitescratch needn’t have died, but he did, because I made a terrible mistake. In fact . . .” It was hard to admit her thought. “I’m thinking of stepping down.”

Harrybrook stared at her with a stunned expression. “That’s a bee-brained idea!” he blurted out at last.

“I’ve been leader for such a long time,” Leafstar responded. “So many seasons. Longer than any of the other current leaders.”

“That’s not the point,” Harrybrook meowed. “You should only think of stepping down if your heart isn’t in the leadership anymore. Is it?”

Leafstar considered his question, wondering when her kit had become so wise, and so direct. “I’m not sure,” she confessed at last. “I’ve been having so many dreams lately about our old territory in the gorge. I wonder if they’re my heart telling me that a new cat should lead SkyClan here by the lake.”

“You shouldn’t think like that.” Harrybrook’s voice was full of certainty. “I know it’s a tense, stressful time right now, but you’ve seen us through those before, and I’m sure you’ll do it again. Great StarClan, you’re the cat who led us to safety here! The journey from the gorge wasn’t easy, and we would never have made it without your leadership.”

Her son’s reassuring words made Leafstar feel a little better. “Thank you for being so kind,” she murmured. She didn’t feel any less guilty about what happened to Kitescratch, but a tiny sense of warmth woke inside her at her son’s support.

She had hardly begun, once more, to head toward her den, when Reedclaw strode into the center of the camp at the foot of the Tallrock.

“Every cat, listen to me!” she yowled.

Leafstar stood, bewildered, as the Clan gathered.

The patrols who were on their way out of camp turned back and paused, waiting in their groups. Frecklewish and Fidgetflake, who had followed Reedclaw, sat side by side in front of her. Starlingpaw and Robinpaw appeared from the apprentices’ den and joined their mentors.

“What is all this about, Reedclaw?” Hawkwing asked when all the Clan members were settled.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Reedclaw asked. “It *should* be obvious to every cat that we need a new leader.” She had to pause for a moment as shocked gasps and a few meows of protest came from the Clan around her. “Leafstar isn’t fit to lead SkyClan any longer,”

she continued at last. “She’s getting old, her senses aren’t sharp, and her poor decision-making cost Kitescratch his life.”

More murmuring and shocked exclamations rose from the assembled Clan as they exchanged disbelieving glances.

“That’s mouse-brained!” Sparrowpelt snapped. “Leafstar has always been our leader, from back when Firestar came to the gorge and restored our Clan.”

“Exactly!” Palesky retorted. “That was a *very long time ago*. And maybe that’s why we need a change now.”

Several cats muttered agreement, and Leafstar noticed that even the cats who were voicing their support of her didn’t sound exactly enthusiastic about it.

Then Harrybrook sprang to his paws. “Those are traitorous words!” he hissed at Reedclaw.

Leafstar felt her throat close with gratitude that her son was standing up for her, but she shook her head at him. This was no time for such aggressive language.

The brown tabby she-cat opened her jaws to reply, but before she could speak, Hawkwing rose and paced into the center of the assembly, waving his tail as a signal to Harrybrook to sit down again.

“I understand you’re grieving, Reedclaw,” he began. “But this is not the time to discuss deposing Leafstar. Today should be about honoring Kitescratch, not arguing among ourselves.”

“We would honor Kitescratch by getting rid of the leader who caused his death,” Reedclaw snarled. “And I’m not backing down on this, no matter what you or any cat says, Hawkwing. Since the Warrior Code was changed, it only takes one cat to begin the process to depose Leafstar, and I’m going ahead with it. We will take the morning to decide. And at sunhigh we should vote on whether Leafstar will still be our leader.”

After all the turmoil, Leafstar remembered that she ought to be joining the cats from the other Clans to investigate the Moonpool and the new Twoleg den. The thought of trekking all that way made her legs shake with weariness.

“Hawkwing.” She beckoned her deputy to her. “I have to go—”

“But you can’t. You would never be back by sunhigh, and you have to be here for the vote. I’ll find another cat to go in your place.”

To her dismay, Leafstar’s reaction was overwhelming relief, mixed with a biting sense of shame. *Is this the way a Clan leader should feel?* At the same time, she was grateful for how sensible Hawkwing was, always so clear-headed and practical. *Maybe the others are right to look to him for leadership.*

“You’re right, Hawkwing,” she meowed. “If you want me, I’ll be in my den.”

Hawkwing nodded, and as Leafstar turned away, she heard him calling for Palesky.

When she managed to make it to her den beneath the Tallrock, she desperately wanted to sleep, but sleep wouldn’t come. She felt bitterly annoyed that she had dozed off during the vigil but now that she was allowed to sleep, she couldn’t, even after

staying awake for most of the night. Every bone in her body felt utterly weary, but her mind raced with anxious thoughts.

What will happen later, when my Clanmates hold their vote?

It was one thing to consider stepping down from leadership on her own terms. It was quite another to think about being voted out.

Eventually Leafstar could see from the movement of sunlight at the entrance to her den that it must be sunhigh. She could hear Reedclaw's harsh voice calling the Clan together and the movement of many cats as they obeyed her summons.

Leafstar wanted nothing more than to hide away in her den, but she knew that she could lose the vote by appearing cowardly now. She padded out into the open and sat down in front of her den, letting her gaze travel calmly over the assembled cats.

"We'll take a simple vote," Reedclaw announced. "All cats who believe Leafstar is a fit and proper leader should stand on that side of the clearing"—she gestured with her tail—"and all those who believe she should step down should stand on the other side, next to me." She stalked across to cast the first vote against Leafstar.

The Clan leader felt all her muscles tense as the cats of SkyClan slowly moved to cast their vote. Reedclaw needed three-quarters of the Clan to vote with her before the question of deposing Leafstar could be passed to the other Clan leaders.

To begin with, Leafstar had been fairly confident that three-quarters of her Clanmates would never vote against her, but her confidence drained away as the cats moved across the clearing. She had to clench her jaw not to yowl in anguish as she watched cats she thought were not only loyal, but her friends, crossing over to Reedclaw's side. It pained her to see that both medicine cats were there, staring at their paws. Since both medicine cats had to vote with the challenger, per the new Warrior Code, Leafstar knew that this meant she could truly lose her leadership if three-quarters of her Clanmates voted against her. Mintfur seemed agonized as she walked over to join the challenger, her head turned aside as if she couldn't even look at Leafstar.

She spotted Birchfeather, the young tom who had come from ShadowClan, standing between the two groups, and looking thoroughly shocked at what was happening. Ridgeglow, who hoped to be Birchfeather's mate, was mewing urgently into his ear, though Leafstar couldn't hear what she was saying. She seemed to be trying to push Birchfeather toward Reedclaw's group.

Leafstar's heart sank. Ridgeglow was Harrybrook's daughter, her own kin.

Hawkwing took a pace forward and spoke to them. "Birchfeather, you aren't a member of SkyClan yet, so you don't have a vote. Ridgeglow, leave him alone and cast your own vote."

Ridgeglow darted a furious look at the Clan deputy, then stalked off to join Reedclaw. Birchfeather dipped his head toward Hawkwing, looking massively relieved.

A sensible young cat, Leafstar thought approvingly.

Finally, only three cats were left to cast their votes: Cloudmist, Nettlesplash, and Fallowfern. Cloudmist and Nettlesplash both padded over to Leafstar's side, their heads held high. Fallowfern stepped forward, glancing to and fro, her eyes narrowing as she worked out what was happening. She had been out of camp, burying Kitescratch, when Reedclaw had demanded the vote. Fallowfern had an uncanny ability to understand what was happening in the Clan even without hearing, but still, Leafstar had no idea what the she-cat thought of these developments.

While she hesitated, Leafstar did a quick count of both groups and realized that Fallowfern had the deciding vote. Her heart thumped so hard in her chest, she thought that every cat must be able to hear it, but she still sat calmly, her tail wrapped around her forepaws.

Seasons seemed to pass, though it was only a few moments before Fallowfern gave her head a slight shake and walked purposefully over to Leafstar's group. Leafstar drew a huge breath, all her insides seeming to melt with relief.

But mixed with her relief was a surge of anxiety that Leafstar couldn't suppress. *That was so close. Did I really deserve for the vote to go my way? Can I live up to their belief in me?*

Hawkwing stepped out of Leafstar's group and stared straight at Reedclaw. "SkyClan has decided that Leafstar will remain our leader, as StarClan intended," he declared. "You've lost."

Reedclaw's eyes shimmered with fury as she met Leafstar's gaze. "Very well. But this isn't over," she snarled.

Chapter 12

"Okay, and what is this?" Jayfeather held up a stem with prickly oval leaves.

"That's borage," Moonpaw replied promptly. "We use it for fevers and to help mother cats who don't have enough milk to feed their kits. Oh," she added after a heartbeat's pause. "The root is good for rat bites."

"Hmm . . . ," Jayfeather responded, placing the borage back in the herb store and taking out another stem. "And this one?"

Moonpaw was enjoying herself. To her own surprise, she found the challenge exhilarating when Jayfeather tested her on her knowledge of herbs. So far she had gotten every one right.

"That's a daisy leaf," she told the medicine cat. "It's good for aching joints, and it's one of the traveling herbs that give cats strength when they set out on a journey."

Jayfeather's only reaction was a grunt. Moonpaw wondered if he was secretly pleased with her—hoping for praise from Jayfeather was like looking for the moon at the bottom of the lake—or if he would like her to fail so that he wouldn't have to make her a full medicine-cat apprentice.

Jayfeather was returning the daisy leaf to the store when Alderheart slipped past the bramble screen and padded up to the back of the den.

"Have you finished, Jayfeather?" he asked. "It's nearly time to leave for the half-moon meeting."

Moonpaw's heart gave a little skip of excitement. *I've worked so hard, and I'm doing so well. Surely they'll let me come this time!*

"Yes, that will do for now," Jayfeather replied.

"How is Moonpaw doing?" Alderheart blinked at her kindly. "I know how much effort she's been making."

Jayfeather repeated the grunt. "Not bad, I suppose."

A warm glow thrilled through Moonpaw. *Not bad* from Jayfeather was like another cat leaping up and down and yowling her name. "So can I come to the meeting tonight?" she asked.

Jayfeather turned his blue gaze on her. "Not this again," he sighed. "You're still not committed to being a medicine-cat apprentice, so no."

Moonpaw couldn't believe that he was being so dismissive. "But I've learned so much since last time!" she protested. "And how will I know if I want to be a medicine cat when I never find out everything that medicine cats do?" *And how will I ever understand my voice if I can't get to the Moonpool?*

"She has a point," Alderheart meowed. "She *has* learned a lot. And when I took her into the forest the other day, herb gathering, she was really good at sniffing out what we needed."

“She still hasn’t made up her mind,” Jayfeather growled, though Moonpaw thought from his tone that he might be weakening.

“I’m not suggesting that we call on StarClan so she can make her medicine-cat vows,” Alderheart continued. “But she’ll never make any progress if all she does is sit in the den sorting herbs. She needs to see what we do. And if we let her touch her nose to the water,” he added, “she might have a real vision, and then we would all know where we stand.”

Jayfeather let out a long, exasperated sigh. “Okay, have it your own way,” he muttered. “But don’t blame me if it all goes wrong.”

Moonpaw kept pausing to stare up at the half-moon, her namesake, as she followed Alderheart and Jayfeather to the Moonpool for her first meeting there. What was it her father had said? *The night you were born, we looked up at the half-moon and saw our beautiful daughter’s face, and that’s when we knew you would be Moonkit.* Bayshine could be so soppy at times, Moonpaw reflected. She knew that her parents loved her. But sometimes she wondered what it would be like to not be unique, to have a face that reminded them of a mouse or a cloud or any of the other ordinary names her Clanmates had.

And to not have to listen to me—is that what you’re getting at?

Moonpaw shook her head, ignoring the voice, and ran after Alderheart and Jayfeather.

Over the last few days, the voice had been mostly quiet. When Moonpaw was focusing on sorting herbs or another medicine-cat task, it went away. But when Moonpaw was curled up in her nest at night, listening to Jayfeather’s snores, the voice had lots of advice for her. She wasn’t a medicine cat; the voice was sure of that.

We’re wasting time, it had told her the night before.

But Moonpaw wasn’t ready to give up. *You can’t tell me what I believe,* she had retorted, and after that the voice had been silent. Until now.

Moonpaw was so tired after the long trek that as she toiled up the rocky slope leading to the Moonpool, she thought her paws would drop off. But all that was forgotten when she pushed her way through the line of bushes and stood at the top of the hollow.

Across from where she was standing, a waterfall poured down in an endless, glittering cascade. Shining spray was thrown up from where it struck rock on the way down, and where it fell into the pool, the water was churned to foam. The surface of the pool moved continually, reflecting the moonlight in flashes of silver. Moonpaw thought she had never seen anything so beautiful.

“Come on.” Jayfeather gave her a nudge. “Don’t just stand there like a frozen rabbit. We’re wasting moonlight.”

Moonpaw didn’t mind Jayfeather’s irritable tones; she was just sorry that he couldn’t see this glorious sight. *But maybe he can see it in visons,* she thought

hopefully.

"There's far more of this Twoleg trash lying around," Alderheart meowed, pointing with his tail to mysterious stuff heaped up a little farther around the hollow. "And some Twoleg has been cutting chunks out of the slope, just like Bayshine reported. I wonder what all that is about."

"There's no point in worrying," Jayfeather responded with a shrug. "No cat will ever understand what Twolegs get up to."

The ThunderClan medicine cats were the last to arrive; the cats from all the other Clans were clustered around the pool. As she followed her Clanmates down the spiral path, wondering who the cats were who had made the paw prints, Moonpaw tried to remember the names of the other medicine cats; Sunbeam, who had been her mentor at the time, had pointed them out to her at the last Gathering. But she was still confused, and grateful when Alderheart named them as he introduced her.

"Frecklewish and Fidgetflake are the SkyClan medicine cats," he began, dipping his head toward a mottled brown she-cat and a black-and-white tom.

"Greetings," Frecklewish mewed; she sounded slightly surprised, disconcerting Moonpaw as she dipped her head in response.

Alderheart moved on to introduce Moonpaw to the RiverClan medicine cats, a beautiful golden she-cat named Mothwing and a small pale gray she-cat whose name was Frostdawn. Mothwing greeted her formally, but Frostdawn's eyes were warm as she stepped up to Moonpaw and touched noses with her. "You're welcome," she mewed. "I was an apprentice not so long ago, so I know how strange it feels at first."

"She's not a medicine-cat apprentice yet," Jayfeather snapped, overhearing. "She's only trying it out."

Moonpaw felt a prickle of nervousness at Jayfeather's sharp words, until she spotted a glimmer of amusement in Frostdawn's eyes and relaxed into a grateful purr. Then she had to turn away as Kestrelflight and Whistlebreeze greeted her, their lithe, wiry bodies proclaiming that they were WindClan cats.

Last to greet her were Puddleshine, a brown tom with white splotches, who was a ShadowClan medicine cat, and his Clanmate Shadowsight, a scrawny tabby tom who was scarcely bigger than Moonpaw.

"We weren't expecting to see another cat with you," Frecklewish meowed when the introductions were over.

"Moonpaw thinks she might be having visions," Alderheart explained, "so she's considering whether she should become a medicine-cat apprentice."

The other medicine cats exchanged pleased glances. "We can always use another medicine cat," Frostdawn purred.

"With a name like Moonpaw," Puddleshine added, "it makes sense she would have a connection to the stars."

"That's true," Alderheart responded. "Ever since she was born, ThunderClan has known that there was something special about Moonpaw."

Hot embarrassment flooded over Moonpaw as the other cats stared at her unusual face. She knew their attention was meant kindly, but she felt it would be so lovely just to slip into the background, to be no more special than any other cat.

Sometimes I wish I had littermates, just so cats wouldn't always be concentrating on me.

"Okay, it's great to meet Moonpaw," Kestrelflight mewed at last. "But we should be sharing news. Crowfeather tells me that trash from the Twolegs' new den is tainting the stream that runs through SkyClan territory."

"We had the same news from Tawnypelt," Puddleshine agreed. "She said that some of the patrol left early, so I sent a message around to the other Clans to make sure they were kept up to date."

"Thank you for that." Jayfeather gave an irritated twitch of his tail. "Squirrelstar had a few words with Bayshine about not staying to investigate properly."

"Well, that prey is eaten now." Mothwing's voice was calm, averting a possible argument. "At least we know what's causing the problem, even if we can't see a way of making it right."

"And it's not the only problem," Fidgetflake added. "What about all this mess?" He waved his tail around to indicate everything the Twolegs had done to the Moonpool hollow. "What's going on here?"

Moonpaw watched as the other cats glanced around, exchanging quiet comments. Besides Fidgetflake, none of them seemed seriously concerned.

"The Twolegs haven't interfered with us coming here," Jayfeather pointed out. "At least not yet. We all know how Twolegs leave their paw prints everywhere. It doesn't mean they're planning to do more."

"True, let's move on," Mothwing mewed briskly. "RiverClan has had an outbreak of whitecough, but we cured it with doses of catmint. It didn't develop into greencough."

"We've had it, too," Kestrelflight reported, "and like you, we dealt with it. We're not worried about an outbreak of greencough."

"We have plenty of catmint," Mothwing added, "and there's more in the Twoleg gardens along the Thunderpath just outside RiverClan territory. We have enough to share, if any Clan is in need."

The other medicine cats murmured their thanks. Moonpaw was impressed by the way that they cooperated without too much insistence on Clan boundaries.

"We've had a few cases of whitecough," Fidgetflake continued, "and that's partly because SkyClan is very hungry. Prey is short because of the tainted stream, and that makes us more likely to fall sick."

"A family of badgers has moved in, too," Frecklewish declared. "But we hope we can drive them out soon, and maybe healthy prey will be easier to find once they're gone."

Moonpaw was aware of added tension as the SkyClan medicine cat spoke, and the exchange of some awkward glances from the cats of the other Clans. She remembered

how Leafstar had asked ShadowClan and ThunderClan for help in hunting and had been swiftly refused.

When the medicine cats had finished sharing their news, all of them, except for Mothwing and Shadowsight, gathered around the edge of the pool. Moonpaw almost asked why they drew back, when she recalled how Alderheart had explained to her that neither of them had made contact with StarClan. Mothwing had chosen not to speak with the spirits of her warrior ancestors, but Shadowsight had never had a true connection and might still be feeling raw about that. Her belly lurched at the thought that she had almost said something really tactless.

She felt even worse when Alderheart beckoned her with his tail. "Come on, Moonpaw," he mewed encouragingly. "You can try this too. You might find the answers you need."

I hope so, Moonpaw thought.

Nervously, her paws tingling, she padded up to the edge of the pool and settled down on a flat rock just as the other medicine cats were doing.

"Touch your nose to the water," Alderheart instructed her, "and see whether a StarClan warrior will speak to you."

Glancing around so she could copy the other cats, Moonpaw leaned over the water and lowered her head. She had to brace herself; the water seemed so cold as her nose touched it, like icy claws invading her whole body.

Moonpaw tried to clear her mind and let the vision come to her, just as Alderheart had told her. But it was hard to do that when as soon as she settled down, the voice spoke in her mind again.

It's just me in here, the voice piped up every few heartbeats. *What, were you expecting some other cat?*

Alderheart had told Moonpaw that when a medicine cat touched their nose to the water, they would find themselves in StarClan territory.

Maybe if I open my eyes, I'll find that I'm already there.

Excitement stirred inside Moonpaw as she let her eyes slip open. But instead of the sunlit slopes where her warrior ancestors lived, all she could see was the shifting waters of the Moonpool . . . and the reflection of the orange tabby cat she had seen beside the lake.

Moonpaw jumped back, startled, then leaned forward again to stare into the water. The orange tabby seemed to be hovering above her own reflection, as if it were standing behind her. It seemed poised to attack, a malevolent glint in its eyes.

"Stop it! Leave me alone!" she cried out.

With an outstretched paw she slashed at the surface of the water, desperate to make the reflection vanish. But as she did so, she felt her other three paws slip on the smooth surface of the stone.

Moonpaw let out a shriek as she tumbled into the freezing water of the Moonpool. "Help!" she yowled, flailing her legs frantically. "I can't swim!"

“I’m so sorry, really I am!”

The moon was close to setting as Moonpaw, her fur almost dry, followed Jayfeather and Alderheart back into the ThunderClan camp. Jayfeather’s huffing breath and bristling fur told her how angry he was, while Alderheart expressed his silent irritation in a twitching tail-tip.

Moonpaw had shaken out her fur for what felt like moons, and all the other medicine cats had helped to warm her after Mothwing and Frostdawn had dragged her out of the pool. In such cold weather, getting wet could be dangerous.

“I just—I slipped,” she murmured wretchedly.

Jayfeather halted outside the medicine cats’ den and let out a long sigh. “Tell us exactly what you saw, one more time,” he meowed.

For a couple of heartbeats Moonpaw hesitated. “I saw a cat on the surface of the water,” she responded at last.

“A familiar cat?” Alderheart asked.

Moonpaw wasn’t sure what to say, or how much she wanted to let her mentors know. “I think it was a cat I’ve seen before,” she replied. “But I’m not sure who . . .”

Jayfeather flexed his claws, his anger seeming to subside. “Did the cat have sparkles in its fur?”

Moonpaw considered his question. Surely the orange tabby cat couldn’t be the spirit of one of her warrior ancestors! But maybe its fur *did* sparkle . . . or was it just the reflection of moonlight in the water? “I’m not sure,” she admitted eventually.

Alderheart glanced at Jayfeather. “It does sound like a vision,” he meowed. “Which means she is a medicine cat after all.”

Reluctantly, Jayfeather nodded. “We didn’t expect her to see anything,”

Alderheart turned back to Moonpaw, lowering his head to gaze into her eyes. “You can’t be afraid of your visions,” he told her gently. “StarClan will never try to hurt you. They give us important information that we can’t get any other way.”

“We’ll never know what information this cat was trying to give Moonpaw,” Jayfeather grumbled. “Because she decided to—what? Try to attack it? Try to join it?”

“I’m not sure what I was trying to do,” Moonpaw mumbled. “Touch it, maybe?”

Jayfeather let out an irritated snort. “Have you got bees in your brain? You can’t touch a vision! That’s why it’s called a *vision*. You see it only, get it?”

“Do you see in visions?” Moonpaw asked, looking into Jayfeather’s milky blind eyes.

“Of course I do,” he snapped. “My being blind has never stopped StarClan from reaching me.”

“We’re really lucky Mothwing and Frostdawn jumped in to save you,” Alderheart broke in. “The Moonpool is deep and very cold.”

Shivering, Moonpaw nodded agreement.

“But in the future,” Alderheart added, “you’ll need to learn how to control your impulses when a vision comes to you . . . or you won’t work out as a medicine cat.

Now," he continued more kindly, "fluff yourself out some more, and dry off the rest of that water. Then we'll all bed down for the night. We can talk about this in the morning."

He and Jayfeather headed into the den, while Moonpaw walked around, trying to shake off the water as Alderheart had told her. When she thought she was as dry as she could be, she sat down to give herself a thorough grooming.

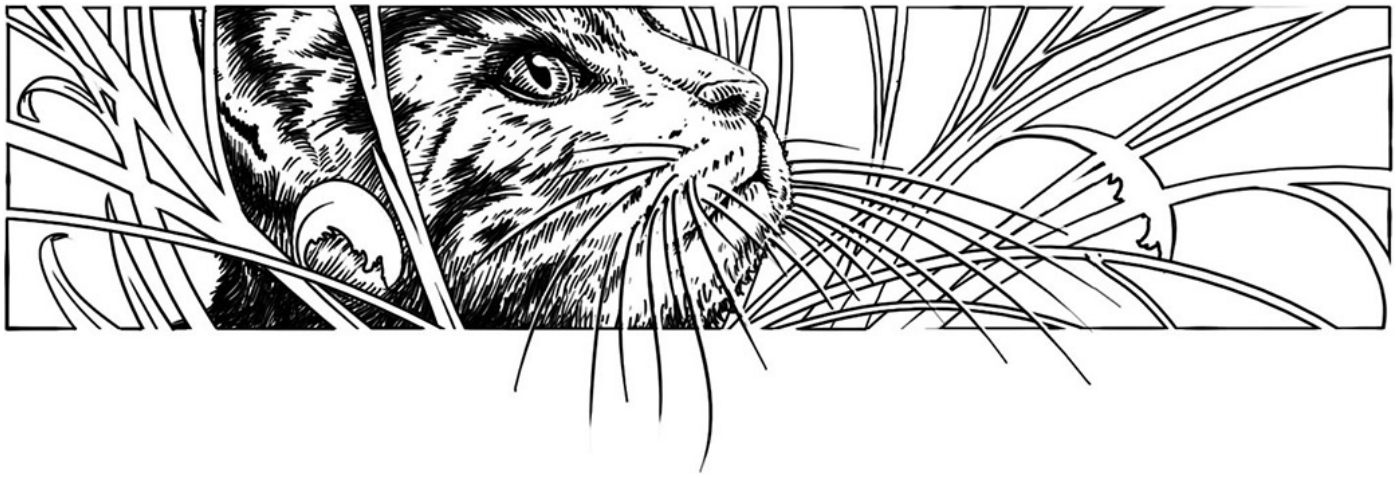
The voice, which had been quiet since Moonpaw's accident, suddenly piped up. *Well, that was embarrassing. For you, I mean.*

Furious anger coursed through Moonpaw, driving off the last of the chill of the pool water. *You made me do that! You were threatening me!*

Not threatening, just saying hello—isn't that allowed? Anyway, are we ready to give up on being a medicine cat yet? It's clearly not for us.

Moonpaw let out a growl from deep in her throat. *There is no "us." I make my own decisions.*

The voice laughed, as high-pitched as a kit's. *You really believe that, don't you?* it meowed.



Chapter 13

"And then . . ." Puddleshine shook his head. "We heard this *splash*! We were all pulled out of our visions and turned around to see Moonpaw flailing around in the Moonpool!"

"Oh, for StarClan's sake!" Tawnypelt muttered.

The two medicine cats had returned to the ShadowClan camp, and after they had reported to Tigerstar about the half-moon meeting, they had headed for the fresh-kill pile. Now they were sharing a leisurely piece of prey, along with Tawnypelt, Hopwhisker, and Spireclaw.

Hopwhisker let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "I bet that surprised StarClan!"

The sun had risen behind clouds, and a brief shower had swept over the ShadowClan camp. But now the clouds had cleared away, and the sun shone down on warriors gathered to eat and enjoy the unusually warm weather.

But Tawnypelt felt unsettled, and Puddleshine's story only added to that feeling. "Were there still strange markings around the Moonpool?" she asked. "And a pile of Twoleg trash?"

Puddleshine blinked at her, dismayed. "There were," he replied, "more than there were at the last meeting, but that isn't why Moonpaw fell in. All the medicine cats agreed that she was probably startled by her first real vision."

"But it can't be good, can it," Tawnypelt pressed, "that the Twolegs have put even more evidence of themselves at the Moonpool?"

"It was rather jarring," Shadowsight agreed. "Until now the Moonpool has been free of interference from Twolegs."

"And that's exactly what I'm worried about!" Tawnypelt felt herself growing distraught, and she struggled to control herself. "What if by the next meeting the Twolegs have blocked the spiral path? Or, worse—what if there are Twolegs there, splashing around in the Moonpool? How will the Clans connect to StarClan then?"

Tigerstar had emerged from his den while Tawnypelt was speaking, and he paced across the camp to join the group around the fresh-kill pile. "Tawnypelt, I think you're getting a bit ahead of yourself," he declared. "The medicine cats can connect to StarClan just fine when there isn't a clumsy new apprentice in the mix."

Tawnypelt nodded in acknowledgment of her Clan leader's point. "But don't forget how Crowfeather and I saw that the Twolegs have tainted the SkyClan stream with their trash."

It felt as though a bird were fluttering in Tawnypelt's belly when she thought of Crowfeather. *I wonder what he's doing now.* But as soon as the thought crossed her mind, Tawnypelt began scolding herself. *Stop this at once!*

“It’s not going to clean itself up,” she continued to Tigerstar. “Shouldn’t we be thinking about how we’ll connect to StarClan if Twolegs invade the Moonpool?”

Tigerstar let out a groan. “Tawnypelt, you’re letting your emotions get the better of you,” he sighed. “There are some strange marks! Twolegs are causing problems! What else is new?”

“Twolegs are usually a problem in greenleaf,” Puddleshine pointed out. “But soon it will be leaf-bare.”

“Surely that means they’ll be too cold to go on with this bee-brained behavior,” Hopwhisker put in. “If there’s one thing that we know about Twolegs, it’s that they retreat into their dens when leaf-bare comes.”

Then Tawnypelt spotted Oakfur, who was nibbling on a vole close by; the elder caught her gaze. “Twolegs are unpredictable,” he pointed out, shaking his head. “No cat thought we would be driven from the old forest until it happened. I’m not saying that we should panic, but we should take seriously whatever the Twolegs are up to.”

“What happened in the old forest was different,” Tigerstar responded with an irritated twitch of his whiskers. “Then it was clear that the Twolegs were encroaching on our territory. This time the Twoleg activity is outside Clan territory altogether. And if we do end up needing a new method to connect to StarClan, then StarClan will show us the way. There’s no need for any more discussion,” he finished, with a hard stare at Tawnypelt.

A biting retort rose to Tawnypelt’s lips, but she forced it back.

When she had finished her piece of prey, she saw that Tigerstar had retreated and was sitting beside Dovewing at the entrance to their den. After a moment’s thought, she padded over to them.

“I’m going to head over to the SkyClan border and see if I can talk to Birchfeather,” she meowed. “Is there any message you would like me to take?”

Dovewing’s eyes misted over with sorrow, and she seemed about to speak, but as she opened her jaws, Tigerstar interrupted with a blunt “No. Remember, Dovewing and I have decided to show Birchfeather tough love. We won’t be interacting with him while he’s aiming to become a SkyClan cat.”

Tawnypelt nodded, then gave a last glance at Dovewing. The gray she-cat had a wistful expression, but she said nothing.

“Okay,” Tawnypelt mewed curtly. “I won’t mention you.”

Tawnypelt stood beneath the spreading boughs of an oak tree on the ShadowClan side of the border with SkyClan, waiting for a patrol to come along. Clouds had gathered again, and the early warmth had faded; Tawnypelt stamped her paws and fluffed out her fur in an attempt to keep warm.

Eventually she caught a strong whiff of SkyClan scent, and a patrol of three cats appeared from behind a bramble thicket, with Rootspring in the lead. He was carrying prey, though it was only a single mouse, while his Clanmates had nothing.

They really are in trouble, Tawnypelt thought.

As soon as Rootspring spotted Tawnypelt, he set his catch down, said a word to the other two—Sagenose and Violetshine—and padded over to join Tawnypelt.

"Greetings." Rootspring dipped his head as he halted at the border. "What can I do for you, Tawnypelt?"

"I was hoping I might speak to Birchfeather," Tawnypelt explained. "Could you find him, please, and tell him I'm waiting?"

For a moment Rootspring hesitated, a doubtful look in his eyes. "I don't know," he mewed at last. "Birchfeather is hoping to become a SkyClan cat. It won't do him any good if it looks like he still has a paw in ShadowClan."

"I know," Tawnypelt responded. "I only want to find out if he's okay, and if he has a message for his parents. You know he's my kin, right?"

She watched Rootspring as he blinked thoughtfully, not replying right away. Her hopes were high; he should know, if any cat did, the difficulties of loving a cat from a different Clan.

Finally the yellow tom relaxed, letting out a long sigh. "Okay," he mewed. "We're heading back to camp anyway. If he's there, I'll tell him."

"Thank you!"

Rootspring turned, beckoning with his tail to the rest of the patrol, and all three cats vanished into the undergrowth.

Tawnypelt resigned herself to waiting again, but it didn't seem long before Birchfeather came bursting out of the trees and skidded to a halt at the border in front of her. She couldn't believe how much older he looked, even though he had been living in SkyClan for less than a moon.

"Greetings, Tawnypelt," Birchfeather panted. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks," Tawnypelt replied. "How about you?"

"Oh . . . I'm fine too."

In spite of the young tom's words, Tawnypelt could see that he looked thoroughly dejected, his whiskers drooping and his tail resting on the ground.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"What? Nothing! Nothing's the matter," Birchfeather protested.

"And hedgehogs fly," Tawnypelt responded. "Come on, Birchfeather, I can see something's wrong. Is it about Ridgeglow?"

Birchfeather's eyes stretched wide. "No! Ridgeglow and I are great."

"Then what is it?" Tawnypelt was determined not to let Birchfeather leave without an explanation. "You can tell me."

The young tom took a deep breath. "Okay, but you can't breathe a word to any other cat. Promise?"

Tawnypelt nodded. "I promise—unless ShadowClan would be hurt if I keep quiet."

"Oh, it's nothing like that," Birchfeather assured her. "It's—" He broke off and glanced furtively from side to side, as if he expected cats to be lurking under every bush

to spy on him. “It’s Leafstar. Some of the SkyClan cats tried to depose her.”

“Depose *Leafstar*?” Tawnypelt repeated, as stunned as if the nearby oak tree had crashed down on top of her. “Why, in the name of StarClan?”

“She led a patrol to deal with a badger on SkyClan territory,” Birchfeather explained, “and for some reason she attacked one of SkyClan’s own cats, thinking he was a badger, and another cat died. I wasn’t there, so I don’t know what really happened, but because of that, some of the cats are very angry and say she can’t do the job anymore.”

“But that could have happened to any cat,” Tawnypelt pointed out. If anything, Birchfeather’s explanation had increased her confusion.

“But they didn’t. They happened to her,” Birchfeather responded. “And some cats say that it’s because she’s too old and slow. She’s so much older than Tigerstar! She’s the oldest leader in all the Clans. Did you know that?”

“I never thought about it,” Tawnypelt mewed. “I suppose it’s true. But being old isn’t all bad, is it? Leafstar has so much wisdom, and—”

“Too old or not, I just wish SkyClan would decide,” Birchfeather interrupted. “Because while they’re dithering around, no cat is assigning me my trials, and I don’t know whether I’ll be able to join SkyClan.”

“That must be tough.” Tawnypelt suppressed a pulse of selfish joy at the thought that Birchfeather might have to come home. Knowing that he needed her support, she reached her tail across the border to touch the younger cat’s shoulder. “But surely it’s tough for Leafstar too.”

Birchfeather’s only reply was a frustrated grunt.

“You’re always welcome back in ShadowClan, you know,” Tawnypelt assured him, hoping she could cheer him up. “No cat would be angry with you if you returned.”

“But I can’t just leave!” Birchfeather protested. “I could never do that to Ridgeglow.” His voice softened and his eyes seemed to glow. “Our love is so true, it overwhelms me sometimes! Have you ever felt love like that, Tawnypelt?”

A sudden memory of Rowanclaw invaded Tawnypelt’s mind: his ginger pelt glowing in the sunshine, his powerful muscles bunching and stretching as he raced through the pine trees in pursuit of a squirrel. The bright image was so overwhelming that it was a moment before she could collect herself and reply, “Yes,” to Birchfeather.

She had been so used to being Rowanclaw’s mate, she had assumed they would go on together into old age. She had never imagined that she would have to live so much of her life without him.

Will I ever feel like that again? she asked herself, then immediately dismissed the thought. *Who with?* There was no other cat in ShadowClan who could be her mate—no cat her age, no cat who attracted her.

Suddenly, unbidden, an image of Crowfeather entered her mind: his lithe, muscular body, his thick dark gray fur, the brilliant intensity of his blue eyes. She squeezed her eyes shut, as if that could banish the vision, and gave her pelt a shake.

What's wrong with me? Hasn't Crowfeather already had his share of doomed romances with cats from other Clans?

"I have to go," Birchfeather meowed. "I don't want any cat to start wondering why I've been gone so long."

"Of course," Tawnypelt responded. "Stay strong, and remember you always have a home in ShadowClan. Ridgeglow would be welcome to join you here."

Birchfeather shook his head. "When we have kits, she wants to raise them in SkyClan. But I do miss my family," he confessed. He paused, then added hesitantly, "Do you think they miss me?

"I'm sure they do," Tawnypelt assured him. "But I'm happy to see you on the verge of starting your own family."

"Don't rush me!" Birchfeather protested, beginning to look more cheerful. "Let me at least pass my trials first—if they ever happen."

He stretched his neck across the border to touch noses with Tawnypelt; then, with a word of farewell, he turned and disappeared into the woodland.

Tawnypelt watched him go, her mind drifting back to Leafstar. *That's why she wasn't part of the Twoleg patrol,* she realized. And, without her, the younger cats had all decided that the Twoleg activity wasn't much to worry about.

While she had told Birchfeather to stay strong, Tawnypelt could have given the same reply to Leafstar. "There's nothing wrong with being older," she muttered to herself. "I hope Leafstar recognizes that, too."

Chapter 14

"Leafstar, may I have a word with you?"

At the sound of Tree's voice, Leafstar looked up from where she sat at the entrance to her den. The Clan mediator was striding across the camp toward her, dipping his head as he halted at her side.

The sky was unbroken blue, but there was little warmth in the rays of the sun as it cleared the tops of the trees. Every leaf and blade of grass was edged with frost.

Several days had passed since Reedclaw had led the attempt to remove Leafstar from the leadership of her Clan. Leafstar could still feel tension in the air, like a thunderstorm before it breaks, and she was aware of hostile glances from Reedclaw and some of the cats who had voted with her.

"What can I do for you, Tree?" Leafstar asked, inviting him to sit down with a wave of her tail.

"Hawkwing asked me to speak to you." For some reason, Tree sounded slightly hesitant; normally he was brimming with confidence, and the change in him woke a worm of uneasiness in Leafstar's belly.

"What about?"

"Actually," Tree continued, "he wanted me to set up a meeting with the two of us and Reedclaw. He thought I might be able to straighten out the conflict between you."

Leafstar snorted. *Good luck with that.* "Then where is Reedclaw?" she asked.

"She refused to speak to you," Tree admitted.

Raising one paw, Leafstar licked it and drew it slowly over one ear. She couldn't see much point in a discussion where one of the cats involved refused to take part. "Then why are you here?" she meowed.

"I thought we could still have a discussion," Tree explained, "and see if we can't work out some kind of plan that will be acceptable to Reedclaw. This hostility between the two of you can't be allowed to go on. It will end by splitting the Clan."

"The only plan that will ever be acceptable to Reedclaw is for me to step down as leader," Leafstar snapped. "Is that what you have in mind?"

"Certainly not!" Tree exclaimed, though Leafstar thought he didn't sound all that shocked at the suggestion. "Although that would be one solution, provided that you *wanted* to step down."

Leafstar did not reply, only letting her shoulder fur rise as she glared at the yellow tom.

Looking thoroughly uncomfortable, Tree shifted his paws. "Do you ever feel that your age hinders you?" he asked.

"Of course I do!" *Mouse-brain!* "But every cat is hindered by something."

“Then might it be a good idea to give some of your responsibilities to Hawkwing?” Tree suggested.

Leafstar narrowed her eyes. “Is *that* what’s behind this?” she demanded. “Did Hawkwing send you to persuade me to resign the leadership?”

Now Tree looked genuinely shocked. “No! Hawkwing would never dream of doing that. He supports you absolutely. All he wants is to end the hostility between you and Reedclaw. Don’t you believe that, Leafstar?”

After a long pause, Leafstar nodded. “I trust you, Tree,” she mewed. “If you tell me so, then I’m satisfied.”

Tree visibly relaxed. “Good.”

But in spite of what she had told Tree, Leafstar wasn’t entirely convinced. Sending the mediator to talk out the situation between her and Leafstar was the act of a Clan leader—and when his time came, Hawkwing would make a magnificent leader.

Is he getting impatient? Is he trying to undermine me?

Tree’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Leafstar, let me speak to a few of the cats in private, and see if I can’t talk some sense into them.”

Leafstar didn’t feel very hopeful that the idea would work, but she appreciated how Tree had changed the subject and suggested another way of trying to calm the tension in the Clan.

“That’s good of you, Tree,” she murmured, “and if any cat can persuade them, you can. But—”

She broke off, startled by the sound of hissing and growling from the direction of the fresh-kill pile. Exchanging a worried glance with Tree, she sprang to her paws and ran over, with Tree bounding along at her shoulder.

Beside the fresh-kill pile, Gravelnose and Harrybrook were facing each other, their teeth bared in fury, while each of them had their claws sunk into a stale-looking squirrel leg.

“I can’t believe you’d do this!” Harrybrook hissed. “I grabbed it first! It’s the only healthy prey we found yesterday, and I haven’t eaten in two days.”

Gravelnose didn’t reply, only letting out a snarl and keeping his grip on the squirrel.

“Stop that!” Leafstar yowled. “Clanmates don’t fight each other.”

Both toms broke apart immediately and dropped the prey, though Gravelnose kept one paw resting on it. They faced Leafstar; she could see the shame in their eyes.

More cats were gathering around, and Leafstar knew that she had to assert her authority. “I never thought I would see the day when SkyClan cats battled over prey,” she declared. “We are a Clan, and we look out for each other. It’s true, healthy prey has been scarce lately, but at the fresh-kill pile it’s first come, first served, as long as the elders and kits have been fed.”

“But that’s just my point!” Gravelnose’s eyes were wide with distress. “I wasn’t taking the squirrel leg for myself. It was for my mate, Wrenflight; we’ve just found out that she’s expecting kits.” He let out a long groan. “I wish this had happened at any other

time," he continued, "not now, when prey is so hard to come by. I can only hope that StarClan will see that my kits get enough to eat."

Leafstar scanned the crowd of cats and picked out Wrenflight, who still looked as skinny as ever. The young golden tabby met her gaze briefly, then stared at her paws, obviously uncomfortable with the attention.

Harrybrook whirled around until he faced the two medicine cats, who had padded up from their den. "Is this true?" he demanded. "Is Wrenflight going to have kits? Or is Gravelnose making up a story to justify taking prey?"

Gravelnose let out an indignant hiss at the accusation, but Leafstar raised her tail, signing him to silence.

Frecklewish dipped her head. "It's true."

"Then the squirrel leg belongs to Wrenflight," Leafstar declared.

Gravelnose shot a triumphant glance at Harrybrook, who drew back his lips in the beginning of a snarl. Raising one paw, he slid out his claws. Leafstar braced herself to intervene, but before she could speak, Harrybrook reluctantly lowered his paw again and turned away with a growl.

Ignoring him, Gravelnose picked up the prey and carried it over to Wrenflight, who began to eat delicately. Now and again, she would cast embarrassed looks at her Clanmates, who were gathered around with their jaws watering.

Leafstar padded up to the scanty fresh-kill pile. "There are two chubs left," she pointed out with an annoyed flick of her tail. "Rootspring caught them yesterday. Why isn't any cat eating the fish?"

Needleclaw let out a furious hiss. "We're *SkyClan* cats, not RiverClan. I can't take more than a mouthful of fish before it all comes back up."

"When you're hungry," Leafstar retorted, "you eat the food that you have."

"I'm not sure that Fallowfern has eaten today." Hawkwing spoke up, coming to stand beside Leafstar. "Elders and kits eat first, so we should give her half of a chub, and divide the rest among the other warriors."

Leafstar's ears pricked as she heard grumbles coming from the crowd; she could feel the unhappy glances coming her way.

"I'll starve rather than eat fish."

"Nasty, slimy stuff. Yuck!"

She swung around, letting her gaze travel across her Clan, and the grumbling died; no cat wanted to be identified. But in spite of her irritation, she could understand her cats being disturbed by the meager fresh-kill pile, and having to ration the little food there was.

Watching Hawkwing supervise the distribution of the food, Leafstar realized that there was one thing she could do that might help in a small way to smooth tensions within her Clan. Glancing around, she spotted Starlingpaw, forcing down his small share of fish, then passing his tongue around his jaws over and over again, as if he was trying to get rid of the taste.

Leafstar padded over to him. “Starlingpaw, I need to talk to you,” she began.

Starlingpaw turned to glance at her, then let his gaze drop, sullenly staring at his paws.

“It’s about the badger fight.” There was no response from Starlingpaw, though Leafstar could sense mingled grief and hostility pouring out from him like the reek from a fox’s den. “I want to apologize for what I said to you then.”

Starlingpaw’s ears flicked up in surprise, and he met Leafstar’s gaze for the first time.

“I blamed you for Kitescratch’s death,” Leafstar continued, “and that was terribly unfair of me. In the stress of the battle, I mistook you for another badger, and that caused the confusion when Kitescratch was wounded. It wasn’t your fault, Starlingpaw.”

As she spoke, Leafstar felt the heavy burden that had weighed upon her since that disastrous patrol begin to lift a little. She would never be able to forgive herself for the mistake that had led to her warrior’s death, but at least now she was laying the blame where it truly belonged.

“I shouldn’t have been there,” Starlingpaw mumbled. “It *was* my fault.”

“No.” Leafstar dared to reach out with her tail and rest it on the young tom’s shoulder. “You did make a mistake, but it was no worse than the mistake any apprentice might make in trying to serve their Clan. You wanted to help. You showed courage and loyalty to your Clan, qualities that will make you a fine warrior when the time comes.”

“But I was *stupid*—”

“And you will learn better judgment with experience,” Leafstar told him. “It was unfortunate what happened to Kitescratch, but it wasn’t your fault. And I want to let you know how sorry I am. Sorry for how my actions led to your father’s death, and sorry for the way I accused you. I was wrong.”

For a few heartbeats Starlingpaw was silent. Leafstar didn’t dare hope that he would forgive her, but she hoped that he might begin to forgive himself.

“Thank you, Leafstar,” Starlingpaw murmured at last. He ducked his head and, without waiting to be dismissed, bounded across the camp to the apprentices’ den.

Leafstar watched him go. “At least it’s a start,” she sighed aloud.

Turning away, she saw Hawkwing with several SkyClan warriors clustered around him as he organized hunting patrols. With her next task in mind, she waited until the cats had left, then padded over to his side.

“Hawkwing,” she began, drawing her deputy away toward her den. “I’ve had time to think things over, and I believe we must have another try at driving out the badgers. They must be taking prey from that part of the territory—prey that’s rightfully ours.”

“I agree,” Hawkwing meowed. “Let’s go for it, as soon as we can.”

“I’ve started to put a plan together—”

But before she could explain what her plan was, Hawkwing interrupted her. “Actually, Leafstar, I’d like to deal with it for you,” he suggested delicately.

Leafstar stared at him, a little taken aback. “I’m perfectly capable of helping to drive the badgers out,” she asserted, an edge to her tone. “What happened was—”

“I know that was an accident,” Hawkwing assured her. “But emotions are still very raw, and just for appearances’ sake, I think it’s best if I lead the patrol to get rid of the badgers. I already have a plan. . . .”

Leafstar let her mind wander as Hawkwing explained what he intended to do. *The shortage of prey is the most important challenge facing SkyClan,* she reflected. *Is Hawkwing trying to take the leadership away from me? Do my Clanmates really not trust me enough to let me help? Haven’t I led them well until now?*

But then her belly began to roil with guilt as she remembered. *Kitescratch trusted you . . . and look where that got him.*

Hawkwing was clearly waiting for her answer. “Yes, that all sounds good,” she responded, knowing she really had no choice.

“Then we’ll leave at sunhigh,” Hawkwing meowed, “to strike while the badgers are sleeping.”

Dipping his head, he left to call a patrol together, leaving Leafstar to wander back to her den. She had complete faith in Hawkwing, but it was so strange to be left here in camp when her Clanmates were going into danger, and she was kept from protecting them.

Leafstar dozed uneasily until she was roused by a commotion outside in the camp. *What now?* she asked herself, afraid of encountering more trouble to add to the burden already on her shoulders.

But then she realized that the yowls she could hear were joyful, not angry or terrified. She stumbled out of her den to see Hawkwing leading a victorious patrol back into camp, while their Clanmates clustered around, showering them with congratulations. Rabbitleap was wearing a striped badger tail around his neck.

“The badgers are gone!” Hawkwing announced, raising his voice to be heard above the clamor. “We killed the male, and the female and the two kits ran off. Once they were gone, we pulled apart the set. They won’t be back anytime soon.”

The whole Clan was delighted by the news, yowling their approval and even chanting Hawkwing’s name. “Hawkwing! Hawkwing!”

As the noise began to die down, Leafstar heard Mintfur meow, “Finally, something to celebrate.”

Hawkwing also clearly overheard her. “We need to thank Leafstar, too,” he declared. “She helped put the plan together.”

Only a few yowls of approval broke out for Leafstar, a ragged sound that soon died away. *And quite right, too,* she thought, sickened by the false praise. *I had nothing to do with it.*

“Hawkwing, you did well.” Each word that Leafstar forced out felt like crow-food lodged in her throat. “Your Clan honors you.”

As the rest of the Clan gathered around Hawkwing and his patrol, eager to hear all the details of the battle, Leafstar stayed to listen too, not giving any cat reason to accuse her of not recognizing her deputy's achievement. But as the light began to fade, she slipped away, retreating to her den, where she stared blankly at the rough stone walls. The suspicion she couldn't quite stifle came back into her mind.

Is Hawkwing really trying to undermine me?

Echosong, who had featured so often in her dreams lately, came into Leafstar's mind. "What should I do?" she murmured out loud to her former medicine cat. Something felt terribly wrong, as if she were witnessing the vigil for her own death. She couldn't grasp the sense of being still here, in the SkyClan camp, while in reality she felt as if she was somewhere else entirely. "How can I prove to them that I'm still a capable leader? How can I win back my Clan?"

There was no response from Echosong, nothing but a rumble from Leafstar's belly. *That's the answer!* she thought. The Clan was hungry, and she was still able to hunt. She didn't want to call a patrol; she needed solitude and silence to clear her head.

I'll go alone.

Her cats were still celebrating Hawkwing's success, and Plumwillow, who was on guard at the camp entrance, was paying more attention to that than to her duties. Leafstar found it easy to slip past her and into the forest.

She headed for the rocky, mountainous area near the edge of SkyClan territory, where the badgers had been living. They must have found plenty of healthy prey there, and now that they were gone, there should be some left for the cats.

For once, the Twoleg roaring was silent; Leafstar guessed that they had all gone back to their dens for the night. Although her eyesight was dimming, there was nothing wrong with her hearing or her sense of smell, and she kept her ears pricked and her jaws open to taste the air as she prowled through the undergrowth. Gradually she relaxed, enjoying the freshness of the woods as the sun began to set, and the exercise of her warrior skills.

In a clearing close to where the badger set had been, she spotted a gray blur that resolved itself into a pigeon, pecking at something in the grass. Leafstar tried creeping up on it, her belly fur brushing the ground, but something must have alerted the bird; spooked, it flew off with a clatter of wings.

"Mouse dung!" Leafstar muttered.

Not much later she paused to check for prey smells and picked up rabbit scent somewhere nearby. Peering around, she caught sight of the creature hopping slowly in front of her, stopping every few heartbeats to nibble at tufts of grass. It was large and plump; Leafstar's jaws started to water as she imagined sinking her teeth into its juicy flesh and how many of her Clanmates would be able to enjoy it.

Stealthily she crept toward it, setting her paws down lightly, but the breeze was blowing in the wrong direction, carrying her scent to her prey. The rabbit sensed her, sat

erect, then took off, fleeing across a clearing and diving into a thick growth of hazel saplings.

Leafstar hurled herself after it; she was gaining on it when the rabbit suddenly seemed to disappear. Racing to the spot where it had vanished, she realized that the ground fell away into a rocky ravine. She could just spot the quarry pelting downward; she guessed its burrow must be hidden somewhere among the bushes at the bottom.

With barely a heartbeat's pause, Leafstar gave chase, bounding over the stony outcrops with her gaze fixed on her prey. Not looking where she was going, she had no warning when her paws skidded sideways on an icy slab of rock; she fell, letting out a yowl of terror as she plummeted down. The ravine whirled around her, and she found she was gazing up at the stars, appearing now as the last of the daylight faded.

"StarClan, help me!" she begged.

Then she thumped down hard on the ground, and her head spiked with pain as it struck a rock. Darkness surged around Leafstar, and she knew no more.

Warm sunlight, reflected from the walls of the gorge, soaked into Leafstar's fur. As her vision cleared, she could make out Echosong bending over her, amusement and sympathy mingling in her eyes.

"You always leaped before you looked," her medicine cat mewed. "But you must look after yourself. Difficult times are coming . . . there's no need to make them worse."

"Was it the right decision, to leave the gorge?" Leafstar wasn't sure what impulse led her to ask the question. "Maybe we should never have left."

"Of course we should have; we had to escape Darktail," Echosong reminded her. "And I was the cat who insisted on us trying to find the other Clans."

"Darktail is long gone," Leafstar responded. "And I keep dreaming of the gorge. By the lake, it feels like SkyClan has always had to beg and scrape for every scrap of respect that we get. When we arrived, we had to build three different camps, because no cat could agree where our territory should be! And now my Clan is hungry and the other Clans are just watching us starve. What did we really gain by moving to the lake?" She took a breath, and her voice was shaking as she added, "What kind of leader have I been?"

"Don't start doubting yourself," Echosong told her. The medicine cat wasn't stooping over her any longer; her voice sounded as if it came from farther away. "You'll only make it easier for them."

"Easier for who?" Leafstar asked.

Scrambling to her paws and turning in all directions, she couldn't see the medicine cat anywhere. In fact, the whole gorge looked deserted. Abandoned. Just as it must look now, without the Clan that had made its home there.

Pain exploded behind Leafstar's eyes as she blinked them open. It felt as though her head were on fire, and her back ached terribly. She groped with one paw, trying to find

out where she was.

"Don't move." It was Fidgetflake's voice. "Be as still as you can."

Leafstar peered through the dazzle of sunlight and managed to make out Harrybrook and Rootspring; they were carefully carrying her across a clearing. Fidgetflake paced alongside. The sunlight was so bright it hurt her eyes, and it wasn't yet sunhigh.

"How did you find me so quickly?" she asked.

"Quickly?" Harrybrook mewed. "You've been gone three days. No cat knew where you went. Hawkwing has been sending out patrol after patrol to look for you."

"Eventually I scented you at the edge of the ravine," Rootspring explained. "We looked down and saw you."

"I went hunting," Leafstar told them. "Did you catch the rabbit?"

"Hunting? Alone?" Harrybrook's voice was sharp. "Perhaps you shouldn't do that anymore."

"I hope I haven't caused too much worry," Leafstar sighed.

Rootspring and Harrybrook said nothing, only exchanged a glance that Leafstar couldn't read.

"Let's just hurry and get you to the medicine-cat den," Fidgetflake meowed.

Leafstar fell into a doze, but roused when her Clanmates carried her into the camp. As they headed for the medicine cats' den, more of her Clan began to cluster around her, their voices piercing her aching head like sharp claws.

"Is she all right?"

"What *happened* to her?"

"Where has she *been*?"

Turning her head, she spotted Hawkwing leaving the leader's den and padding over to look down at her, his expression unreadable. She could feel relief from her Clanmates that she had been found alive, but along with that, she felt hostility.

They're angry with me. . . .

In their den, Frecklewish and Fidgetflake quickly got to work, chewing up comfrey to make a poultice for her head, licking her scratches clean before dripping marigold juice into them. Leafstar couldn't stop herself from letting out a moan at Frecklewish's vigorous licking.

"We'll get you some poppy seeds," Fidgetflake assured her. "They'll help you sleep."

When the black-and-white tom brought her three seeds on a hawthorn leaf, Leafstar paused before licking them up. Part of her was eager to sleep and escape the pain. But another part was worried.

Something is brewing among my Clanmates. . . .

Chapter 15

Moonpaw was crouching beside the fresh-kill pile, eating a vole, when she heard some cat calling her name from the opposite side of the camp. She looked up to see Shinepaw and Goldenpaw bounding toward her.

"We heard you went to the Moonpool last night," Goldenpaw meowed as he skidded to a halt beside Moonpaw. "What was it like?"

"Did you meet any StarClan cats?" Shinepaw asked, her eyes alight with excitement.

Moonpaw couldn't reply until she had swallowed her mouthful of vole. "It's very beautiful there," she told the two apprentices. "But you know I'm not allowed to tell you much about what happened."

Thank StarClan, she added silently to herself. *I don't want every cat to know that I fell in the pool and had to be rescued by the RiverClan cats.* She hoped Alderheart and Jayfeather wouldn't spread the news around; her misadventure wasn't the kind of secret thing they were forbidden to talk about.

Goldenpaw let out a long sigh. "You're so lucky, Moonpaw!" he exclaimed. "I wish I could travel up into the hills and see the Moonpool."

His littermate gave him a friendly nudge. "Goldenpaw, you're *not* a medicine cat!"

"But you might get to go there one day," Moonpaw mewed. "Alderheart told me that if there might be danger in the hills, the medicine cats would need a warrior escort. Warriors are allowed to go as far as the lip of the hollow. You can see the pool and everything from there."

"That would be great," Goldenpaw responded, and his sister nodded in agreement.

"Hey!" The call came from Finleap, standing at the entrance to the thorn tunnel with Flipclaw beside him. "Are you going to stand there all day gossiping?"

"Oops," mewed Shinepaw.

"We'd better go," Goldenpaw added. "We're due for hunting practice. See you later, Moonpaw."

"May the prey run well!" Moonpaw wished them as they dashed off to join their mentors.

It was time she got back to the medicine cats' den, she thought, as she gulped down the last few mouthfuls of vole. She didn't want Jayfeather to be annoyed with her; he could be scathing enough to make her whiskers curl.

I don't know why you bother, her voice declared. *You're not going to be a medicine cat.*

I'm not listening to you! Moonpaw responded crossly, and fled for the den as if she could leave the taunting voice far behind her.

Back in the medicine cats' den, Moonpaw began sorting out the herb store, making sure that every herb was in its right place and pulling out any stems that were too withered to be useful. Alderheart was out in the forest, foraging for what he could find before leaf-bare set in, while Jayfeather was taking a break to eat a piece of prey at the fresh-kill pile.

Once she was sure that the store was in perfect order, Moonpaw tossed the dead herbs outside the den and began fluffing up the nests, making sure that the moss and bracken weren't straggling over the den floor and searching carefully for any thorns that might have been missed when the bedding was brought in.

I'm getting good at this, she reflected.

She knew which herbs would cure the most common ailments. *Watermint for bellyache, catmint or tansy for whitecough, dock leaf for sore pads,* she chanted in her mind. She had discovered that she was good with cats in pain, gentle and efficient, however much they complained. She liked the feeling of helping her Clanmates.

Except for its rude remark while she was eating, her voice had been quieter lately, but Moonpaw knew it was still there. And that was why she feared that, as much as she was enjoying her work here, this was all wrong. The voice in her head was not a vision.

And she was not a medicine cat.

The voice is right, she admitted reluctantly.

"How are you doing?"

Moonpaw turned at the sound of Jayfeather's voice to see the medicine cat brushing past the bramble screen into the den. "I'm all done," she replied. "The herbs are sorted, and I've freshened up the nests and made sure the floor is clear."

"Good." Jayfeather padded around the den, feeling the floor as if he could see with his paws, and sniffed carefully at the herb store to make sure everything was organized to his exacting standards. "Very good," he pronounced at last. "You know, Moonpaw," he added thoughtfully, "I'm not sure what to make of you. You're terribly efficient, but I sense that deep down your heart isn't in this. Is that true?"

Moonpaw stared into Jayfeather's eyes. Jayfeather *got* her; she had sensed that ever since she became his apprentice. Alderheart was kind and patient, but Jayfeather saw what the younger medicine cat could not.

"I became a medicine-cat apprentice because I wondered . . . well, whether some of my thoughts might be visions," she began, stumbling over her words. "But now I don't know. . . ."

"What kind of thoughts?" Jayfeather's voice was disturbingly intense.

"I'm not sure." Moonpaw evaded his question. "I'm worried that I'm wasting your time."

"It's not my time I'm worried about." Jayfeather paused for a moment. "Has any cat told you about Ashfur?"

Every hair on Moonpaw's pelt prickled with apprehension. She had heard the name of Ashfur, whispered from cat to cat, but when she was a kit and begged the elders for

stories, that was one story they would never tell. She only knew that a cat called Ashfur had done something so terrible that no cat wanted to talk about him.

"Not really," she replied.

"Ashfur was a ThunderClan cat," Jayfeather told her, "and after he went to StarClan, he sent false visions to Shadowsight. Shadowsight said they were like a voice, telling him what to do. And because Shadowsight trusted the voice, and the Clans trusted Shadowsight, Ashfur was able to take over Brambleclaw's body—he was our leader, Bramblestar, then—and caused such devastation in the Clans. . . ." He let his voice trail off, a shudder passing through his thin body. "If that happened again," he went on eventually, "it could mean the end of the Clans. Is that the kind of thing you're experiencing?"

Panic throbbed through Moonpaw so strongly that she was afraid Jayfeather must sense it. *That must be the "bad thing" that Alderheart mentioned.* She shook her head, then remembered that Jayfeather couldn't see her, and managed to choke out, "No." But in spite of her denial, she was sure that Jayfeather could sense her discomfort.

"Only you can judge whether your visions are real," he meowed. "But you'd better figure it out soon. None of us are getting any younger."

That night, as soon as her mentors were snoring in their nests, Moonpaw sneaked out past the bramble screen and slipped out of the camp through the dirtplace tunnel. She was almost scared out of her fur at the thought of making the long journey to the Moonpool alone, but she knew that Jayfeather was right. It was time to figure this out, once and for all. She needed to have a conversation with the orange cat—the cat behind the voice. It came to her all the time, unbidden, but the only way Moonpaw knew to coax it out was to go to the Moonpool.

The effort of trudging across the moor kept Moonpaw warm, but when she settled down on one of the flat stones around the pool, the intense cold seeped into her bones. The Twoleg markings were still there, as well as the pile of Twoleg stuff at the top of the hollow, but Moonpaw was so intent on her resolve that she scarcely noticed them.

This time, instead of touching her nose to the water, Moonpaw simply stared down into it. At first she didn't see the orange cat behind her reflection. She began to be afraid that after all her exertion it might not appear at all.

Please come out, she begged. *I need to talk to you.*

There was no response to her pleas, and Moonpaw began to fear that she had made the exhausting trek across the moor for nothing.

You must *speak to me!*

Moonpaw put all her strength into the unspoken words, and eventually the cat appeared, seeming to slip out of her own reflection, wavering in the moving waters of the Moonpool.

I thought you didn't want to talk anymore. The orange cat's voice was petulant, and there was resentment in its gaze. *You hardly ever answer me these days.*

I want to talk now, Moonpaw responded. *I need some answers. First, I must know who you are.*

The orange cat's expression changed, amusement sparkling in its green eyes. *You really don't know?*

No! Moonpaw replied, flexing her claws in frustration. *I don't even know if you're real!*

The amusement in the reflection's eyes faded; it was with a serious look that it meowed, *I am you, and you are me. We are two halves.*

Moonpaw sat staring in confusion. *What does that mean?* she asked. *Does every cat have two halves? How do I know that your voice is real, and not just something I'm imagining?*

Of course I'm real, the orange cat insisted. *And I live in a world few cats can see. But I'm tied to you, Moonpaw. We are part of each other.*

That doesn't help, Moonpaw snapped in frustration. *I could still be making it all up somehow.*

The orange cat hesitated, its green gaze growing thoughtful. *Then I'll prove to you that I'm real,* it promised after a few heartbeats. *I'll tell you something that you have no way of knowing.*

Moonpaw found it hard to believe her. *How can you do that?* she asked suspiciously.

Sometimes, in my world, I can see slips in time, the orange cat explained. *It's not quite seeing the future, but it's close. If what I tell you comes true, then you'll know that I'm not lying to you, and that I'm real. Okay?*

Okay, Moonpaw agreed, but every hair on her pelt prickled with foreboding. She wasn't at all sure that she could trust this cat.

Tomorrow the sun will disappear, the orange cat announced. *Your Clanmates will panic, but you will find the sun shining in a hollow tree.*

Moonpaw stared into the water. She thought that was the weirdest thing she had ever heard. Her pelt prickled apprehensively as she asked herself whether she was losing her mind. *The sun is going to disappear—like what, behind clouds? But then it will be in a tree?* It didn't make any sense. She wondered whether Jayfeather and Alderheart felt like this when StarClan gave them a prophecy.

To the orange cat she responded, *Is that it?*

That's it, the orange cat replied. *It's all you need. And when it comes true, you'll know you can trust me.*

With that, the orange cat disappeared from Moonpaw's reflection in the Moonpool. Moonpaw waited a little longer in case it returned, but when it was clear that their conversation was over, she rose, stretching limbs that were cramped by cold, and began the long trek back to camp. She felt disturbed, as if the ground underneath her paws were suddenly unsteady. But thinking back to her encounter with the orange cat, she soon realized that she had gotten what she came for.

If the prediction about the sun came true, Moonpaw would have to believe what the orange cat told her. And if it didn't—which she really hoped it wouldn't—she might have to worry that she had bees in her brain, but at least she could go back to ignoring the voice.

As the sun sank below the horizon the following day, Moonpaw watched it disappear; the scarlet light it left behind began to fade from the sky.

That's it, she thought happily. A full day had gone by, and the sun had never vanished. It had shone brightly from sunrise to sunset.

And that meant the voice was wrong. The orange cat didn't see slips in time, because it wasn't real.

Moonpaw stood breathing in the chilly air of evening, luxuriating in the relief that filled her from her pads to the tips of her ears. If she was imagining all this, she could at least control it, stop paying attention to it. Surely the voice would eventually go away.

I can give up being a medicine-cat apprentice and go back to training as a warrior with Sunbeam as my mentor.

Brushing past the bramble screen, Moonpaw padded to her nest in the medicine cats' den and snuggled down in the bedding for one last time. Tomorrow she would tell Jayfeather that he was right; her heart wasn't in this. She did love part of her medicine cat duties, like sorting herbs and helping sick cats, but she no longer believed she had any connection to StarClan. She would explain that she didn't think that she was a medicine cat after all, and that she wanted to return to being a warrior apprentice.

The voice was silent as Moonpaw drifted into a peaceful sleep.

But clamorous voices outside in the camp soon woke her. As she struggled to throw off the clinging shreds of sleep, she saw that Alderheart and Jayfeather were both stirring.

"What in the name of StarClan?" Jayfeather muttered.

As if in answer to his question, a wail rose above the commotion, the voice of a cat in utter desolation. "My kits! My kits are gone!"

The cry ripped away the last of Moonpaw's drowsiness. Rising to her paws, she stumbled into the open to see a crowd of cats surging around the nursery; Moonpaw wriggled through to see Myrtlebloom, the kits' mother, standing in the entrance, her head thrown back as she let out another wail. "My kits! Oh, my kits!"

Her mate, Shellfur, father of the kits, pressed himself comfortingly against her side. "We'll find them," he mewed, though there was terror in his voice too. "I promise we'll find them."

"Of course we will." Daisy, the she-cat who helped in the nursery, gave Myrtlebloom a reassuring lick. "They're probably just up to some mischief." Raising her voice, she asked, "Has any cat searched the camp?"

"I will." Ivypool, the Clan deputy, broke away from the group and bounded off into the darkness. One or two of the others followed her.

At the same moment, Squirrelstar thrust her way through the crowd until she stood beside the two parents at the nursery entrance. “What happened?” she asked.

Myrtlebloom’s voice shook so much that she could hardly make herself understood. “My kits have disappeared.”

“We don’t understand what could have happened.” Daisy, for all her distress, was managing to control herself. “We were all sleeping, including the kits, and no cat heard anything. Then we woke and found them gone.”

Did they run off? Moonpaw wondered. *Or did someone, or something, take them?* She couldn’t see how a fox or a badger could have gotten into the camp and carried the kits off without some cat being aware of them.

The first hint of dawn was appearing in the sky when Ivypool came back, her silver-and-white fur glimmering in the pale light. “They’re not in camp,” she reported.

Myrtlebloom let out another wail, but Squirrelstar’s crisp voice cut across it. “Who is on guard duty?” she asked.

“I am,” Poppyfrost called out from the camp entrance. “No kits got past me.”

“Of course, that means nothing,” Ivypool pointed out. “They could have sneaked out through the dirtplace tunnel.”

Squirrelstar nodded agreement. “We need a patrol,” the Clan leader meowed. “I’ll lead it. Birchfall, Twigbranch, Cinderheart, with me.”

She headed for the thorn tunnel with the cats she had named behind her. Desperate to know what had happened, Moonpaw tagged along after them, hoping that in the near darkness no cat would notice her and tell her to go back.

Rain had fallen in the night, soaking Moonpaw’s fur as she brushed through the long grass. With a sinking heart, she realized that it would have washed away the kits’ scent, giving the patrol no clue as to where they might have gone.

Squirrelstar headed toward the lake, sending a shiver of horror through Moonpaw at the thought of what could have happened to the kits playing at the edge of the water.

“Oakkit! Sunkit! Hazelkit!” the cats called out as they padded through the undergrowth.

Moonpaw thought that she heard something, but the sound was so faint and indistinct that she was afraid she had imagined it. The searching cats called out again, and as their voices died away, this time a faint whimper answered them.

I did hear a sound!

Squirrelstar immediately veered aside, skirting a bramble thicket, to find Oakkit and Hazelkit huddled together in the shelter of a clump of fern.

“Oh, thank StarClan!” Squirrelstar exclaimed. “You mouse-brained kits! We were all worried sick about you! What were you *thinking*? You know you aren’t supposed to leave camp.”

Hazelkit looked up, her eyes stretched wide. “We were following Sunkit,” she explained in a small voice. “He woke up and left the nursery and wandered out here.”

“Why would he do that?” Birchfall asked, confused.

The two kits looked equally bewildered. “We don’t know. We didn’t think he should go off alone, so we followed him.”

“And I suppose you didn’t wake any cat because you didn’t want to get Sunkit into trouble?” Squirrelstar asked.

Oakkit nodded. “And then we lost him, and we don’t know where he went, and we don’t know the way back to camp, and now we’re all cold and wet,” he whimpered.

“And *hungry*,” Hazelkit added. “And we want Myrtlebloom.”

Moonpaw gazed at the two shivering scraps of fur and thought that no cat could possibly be angry with them; they had surely learned their lesson.

“Cinderheart, take them back to the nursery,” Squirrelstar ordered. “Myrtlebloom and Daisy will get them warm. And ask Alderheart to check them over.”

The gray she-cat flicked her tail in acknowledgment. “Come on, kits,” she meowed in a cheerful tone. “It’s not far.”

When the three cats had disappeared into the undergrowth, Squirrelstar cast a raking glance around her. “Sunkit can’t be far away,” she declared. “We’ll go on looking. You too, Moonpaw. Do you think I can’t see you, lurking behind that oak stump there, and scent you, too? You and I will have words later, but for now you can help.”

Moonpaw ducked her head, thoroughly embarrassed to think that she had ever believed she could get away with sneaking around under Squirrelstar’s nose.

The patrol searched among the undergrowth and under the roots of trees, in a widening circle around the spot where they had found the other two kits, all the while calling Sunkit’s name. But there was no response from Sunkit. Dread grew like a heavy stone in Moonpaw’s belly. It was too easy to imagine a fox snapping up the tiny kit so quickly that he had no chance even to squeal.

“This is hopeless,” Squirrelstar announced at last. “Birchfall, go back to camp and ask Ivypool to organize more patrols, and send them out in all directions. He must be *somewhere*.”

As Birchfall raced off and Squirrelstar headed with Twigbranch toward the lake, Moonpaw had a sudden, sickening realization. It was *Sun*kit who was missing.

The sun will disappear, but you will find it in . . .

“I know where he is!” Moonpaw called out to the other two cats. But they were already well ahead of her, and they didn’t hear.

Moonpaw took a deep breath, then turned and padded off alone.

There was a hollow tree near the old Thunderpath; Sunbeam had shown it to her when Moonpaw was her apprentice. It had been a good place for Sunbeam to teach her a hunting technique where a cat hides and waits for prey.

If the orange cat is really part of me, then it would know that, Moonpaw thought. *That must be where the sun—Sunkit—is “shining.”*

Moonpaw pelted along the old Thunderpath until she reached the hollow tree. Slipping through the gap, she immediately spotted Sunkit huddling in a drift of dead

leaves. Relief at the sight of him was mingled with shock as she realized that the orange cat had led her there.

The voice was right! It must be real after all!

Sunkit let out a whimper as he saw her and seemed to shrink away as if he was scared of her.

"Don't be frightened." Moonpaw tried to make her voice sound comforting. "It's only me, Moonpaw. Everything's okay now. I'll take you home."

"I snagged my leg on a root," Sunkit mewed miserably. "It hurts!"

"Well, I'll carry you, then," Moonpaw told him. "But whatever made you leave the camp and come out here?"

Sunkit just turned his head away and wouldn't answer. Moonpaw could see he was too upset to be questioned, so she helped him climb onto her back and headed for camp.

Sunrise was not far off when Moonpaw brushed through the thorn tunnel and padded into camp with Sunkit clinging to her back. A few cats were outside, but everything was quiet until some cat yowled, "Sunkit!"

Instantly Moonpaw found herself in the midst of an enthusiastic group of cats, clustering around her as she made her way to the nursery. Sorrelstripe ran ahead and poked her head through the entrance. "Come and see who's here!" she meowed.

Shellfur burst out of the nursery with Myrtlebloom a pace behind. The other two kits peered out curiously from the entrance; Alderheart and Jayfeather were both with them, and they seemed quite recovered from their ordeal.

"Sunkit! Sunkit!" Shellfur's voice was shaken with joy. "You found him, Moonpaw! Oh, thank you, thank you!"

Myrtlebloom was purring too hard for her to speak her thanks, but her shining eyes said it all as she lifted Sunkit from Moonpaw's back and carried him into the nursery. Shellfur followed her with a last word of thanks to Moonpaw.

The other cats were still clustering around her, congratulating Moonpaw and asking a whole flurry of questions, when another voice cut across the clamor.

"How did you know where to find him?"

Moonpaw turned around to see Squirrelstar, padding up with Twigbranch behind her. The other cats retreated to give her space as she strode up to Moonpaw.

I can't tell her the truth, Moonpaw thought, desperately casting around for a story that her Clan leader would believe. "I told Sunkit about the hollow tree when I was watching the kits one day," she explained. "Sunkit seemed fascinated by it, and I suspected he might have gone to find it."

"Did you now." Squirrelstar narrowed her eyes, while Moonpaw waited, trying not to let her paws shake. "Well, at least you found him," the Clan leader commented at last, then turned and padded off toward her den.

Moonpaw was about to head back to her own den to see if she could snatch a bit more sleep, when Jayfeather stuck his head out of the nursery. "Moonpaw, come in here a moment," he meowed.

Moonpaw assumed that her mentor wanted her to help him and Alderheart examine the kits and treat Sunkit's leg, but when she followed him inside, she found Oakkit and Hazelkit curled up with their mother, and Alderheart putting a poultice of comfrey on the injured leg.

"Sunkit," Jayfeather began, his voice unusually gentle, "tell me again what happened."

The little kit gave Moonpaw a doubtful look. "I thought I saw Moonpaw outside the nursery," he mewed. "The moonlight was on her fur, and she looked like she was shining. She led me to the hollow tree and told me to stay there."

Moonpaw stared at the kit, stunned, then opened her jaws to deny the story, but there was no need.

"That's impossible," Alderheart declared. "Moonpaw was asleep in the medicine cats' den with me and Jayfeather all night."

"Sunkit must have been having a dream," Myrtlebloom purred, looking up from where she was giving Hazelkit a good lick. "He's confused about what was the dream and what was real." She gazed at her son fondly and added, "We'll have to keep a closer eye on him at night in the future."

Moonpaw stumbled back outside, where the sun was rising, casting a golden light into the camp. Cats were straggling in through the thorn tunnel, back from their search, and raising weary yowls of joy when they heard that all three kits were safe and well.

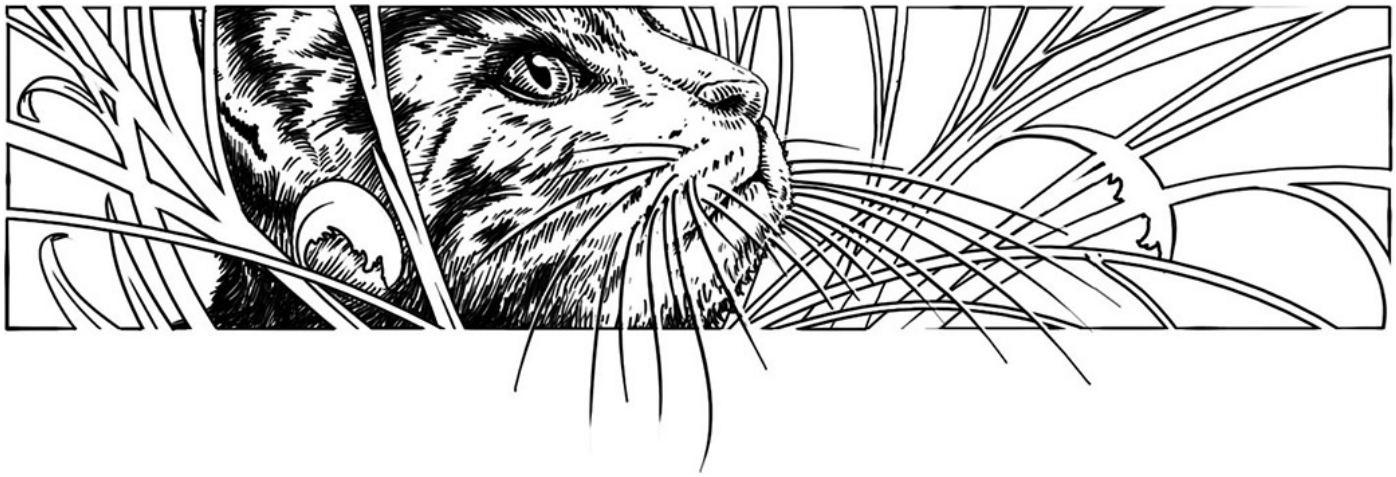
"You look exhausted," Ivypool meowed, appearing at Moonpaw's shoulder. "Go and get some rest. It sounds like you deserve it."

Moonpaw was glad to obey. Back in the medicine cats' den, she stared at the walls and the bramble screen, knowing that she should sleep. But her heart was pounding as if it were trying to burst out of her chest.

She tried to imagine what Sunkit had meant when he said that *she* had led him to the hollow tree. Had she walked in her sleep, to lead him out of camp? Or had Sunkit seen the orange cat? And either way, what would have happened if the kit had been more seriously wounded?

Whatever the truth was, Moonpaw couldn't shake off the feeling that she was responsible. And if the orange cat was willing to hurt a kit . . .

What else is it capable of doing?



Chapter 16

The air was full of enticing scents as Tawnypelt padded through the forest, all her senses alert for prey. Sun shone down through the branches, warming her pelt and dappling the forest floor with golden light.

At first she reveled in the lush surroundings, but gradually the sense crept over her that something was wrong. Halting on the bank of a tiny stream, she raised her head and looked around her. She had left behind the chilly forest, but here the trees were in full leaf, and the sky she could glimpse through the branches was the intense blue of a hot day in greenleaf. She realized, too, that this wasn't ShadowClan territory; she had no idea where she was.

Crouching down to lap from the stream, she wondered whether she was dreaming, or whether she had somehow crossed the border of StarClan territory. *Am I dead?*

"Tawnypelt."

The voice that spoke her name was achingly familiar, though she had not heard it for many seasons. Tawnypelt froze, hardly daring to look up in case the cat she yearned to see was not there.

"Tawnypelt."

At that, Tawnypelt raised her head to see a handsome dark ginger tom standing on the opposite side of the stream. His pelt glittered with starlight, and his amber eyes glowed with love as he gazed at her.

"Rowanclaw," she breathed out. "Oh, Rowanclaw . . ."

Her mate leaped across the stream, and Tawnypelt rose to meet him, droplets of water spinning from her whiskers. She pressed herself against Rowanclaw's side, drawing in his scent, and felt him twine his tail with hers.

"Is this StarClan territory?" she asked after a few moments. "I don't remember dying."

Rowanclaw drew away a little so that he could look down at her. "No, you're walking here in a dream," he told her. "You have many seasons yet to serve your Clan."

Tawnypelt couldn't hold back a snort of disbelief. "I'm not sure my Clan wants me anymore," she meowed. "Tigerstar pays no attention to anything I tell him. Rowanclaw, I *know* that the Twolegs are planning something terrible, at the Moonpool and just beyond SkyClan territory, and no cat is taking me seriously!"

"That's hard," Rowanclaw responded. "But you're right not to give up, no matter what Tigerstar says. You must trust your instincts."

Tawnypelt stepped back, feeling every hair on her pelt slowly rising. "Are you giving me a warning?" she asked.

Rowanclaw shook his head. "Not even the warriors of StarClan see everything," he replied. "And even if I did, I wouldn't be allowed to tell you. But you don't need me to

warn you that change is coming. A cat who can see that is vital to the Clans."

"I wish you were there to back me up when I talk to Tigerstar," Tawnypelt sighed. "It feels like a different ShadowClan now, and I'm not sure I belong there. Oh, Rowanclaw, I miss you so much! I don't think I'll ever feel that close to a cat again."

"I miss you too, Tawnypelt," Rowanclaw purred. "But you can't know that you will never feel love for another cat."

Tawnypelt stared at him. "Wouldn't you mind?"

"In StarClan it is . . . different," Rowanclaw assured her. "Besides, I'm not there with you in the forest anymore. I don't want you to be always alone. I want you to be happy."

He leaned forward to touch noses with her, and at that moment a strong wind caught her and whirled her around. She landed with a jolt and opened her eyes to find herself curled up in her nest in the warriors' den with Cloverfoot's voice calling her Clanmates for hunting patrols.

Tawnypelt drew a long breath, enjoying for a moment the memory of Rowanclaw, his voice and his scent and the feel of his fur. His encouragement strengthened her, to keep on insisting that there was danger for the Clans in what the Twolegs were doing.

But his last words sent a shiver running right through her. *I want you to be happy.*

And with the thought, another cat came into Tawnypelt's mind: a wiry WindClan tom, with dark gray fur and intense blue eyes.

Oh . . . Crowfeather . . .

Leaving the rest of the hunting party behind, Tawnypelt wandered into the woods near the lakeshore, where the trees were widely spaced and the ground that sloped away toward the lake was covered with swaths of bracken. Sometimes this was a good place for mice and voles.

As she tasted the air for prey, she realized she was close to the border, the mingled scents of ShadowClan and SkyClan flowing over her scent glands.

I wonder how Birchfeather is doing, she asked herself. Surely by now he should have started his trials. She couldn't imagine that he would fail, and that meant he would stay in SkyClan with Ridgeglow.

I want him to be happy, but oh, StarClan, I will miss him.

She was about to turn back when she spotted bracken fronds on SkyClan territory wildly waving, and a heartbeat later a squirrel scurried out into the open, heading for the nearest tree and crossing the border on its way. It was quite unaware of Tawnypelt, who crouched down and caught it with a skillful pounce, killing it with a neat bite to its neck.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she mewed.

"Hey!" An indignant yowl came from the direction of the border. "That's SkyClan prey! Give it back now."

Tawnypelt turned to see a she-cat with reddish fur and a white nose standing at the border and glaring at her. After a moment she recognized her as Ridgeglow, Birchfeather's would-be mate.

Well, this is awkward. . . .

But Tawnypelt didn't intend to back down. She felt her hackles rising as she left the squirrel where it lay and padded over to the border to stand facing Ridgeglow.

"That is *not* SkyClan prey," she declared. "I'm standing here on ShadowClan territory, and back there is where I caught the squirrel."

She hoped that Ridgeglow would accept what was obviously true. The moment the squirrel set paw over the border, it became ShadowClan prey, as any cat knew.

But Ridgeglow didn't look prepared to give up. "We were tracking that squirrel across SkyClan territory," she insisted. "It only veered into ShadowClan at the last moment. And we chased it for fox-lengths! Why should our hard work be wasted because the squirrel decided to turn in a different direction?"

Tawnypelt stared at her, bemused. *Does she really expect me to answer for the actions of a squirrel?* "The warrior code—" she began.

But Ridgeglow didn't want to hear it, glaring at Tawnypelt with her fur bushing up. "What did you think?" she asked Tawnypelt. "That you got lucky and a squirrel just happened to jump into your paws?"

"From where I'm standing, that's exactly what happened," Tawnypelt replied, licking the blood from her lips. "The warrior code is quite clear on this: the squirrel is ShadowClan's."

Fury flared in Ridgeglow's eyes. Snarling, she leaped across the border and hurled herself at Tawnypelt. The attack was so unexpected that Tawnypelt lost her balance, staggered, and fell hard on one side, her paws and tail flailing.

Are we really going to fight over this?

As Ridgeglow leaped on top of her, Tawnypelt raked an angry claw across the younger cat's flank and heard her hiss in anger. For a heartbeat she paused, letting Ridgeglow pin her down. She didn't want to fight, and she especially didn't want *this* fight, because Ridgeglow was Birchfeather's mate. *Should I go easy on her?* she wondered. But that would be a betrayal of ShadowClan.

As she braced her muscles and heaved Ridgeglow off her, a frantic yowl rose from the SkyClan side of the border.

"Stop it! Stop it!"

Tawnypelt was startled to hear a familiar voice. As she struggled to her paws, she saw Birchfeather racing out of the trees and halting on the SkyClan side of the border.

"Please don't fight!" he begged, and added as he turned to Ridgeglow, "Tawnypelt is my kin!"

Ridgeglow drew back and leaped back across the border to stand beside Birchfeather. "We can't lose this prey to *any* cat," she protested. "Prey is hard enough to come by on our territory. And you know this isn't a normal hunt."

“What is she meowing about?” Tawnypelt asked Birchfeather, rising to her paws and giving her pelt a shake. “What makes this hunt special?”

“This is one of my tasks,” the young tom explained. “Ridgeglow and I were sent to catch prey—any prey—for the Clan. Things are very bad in SkyClan,” he admitted with a shamefaced look. “The poison in the stream is still making healthy prey scarce. It’s so important that we find some, but we’ve been at it since dawn, and that squirrel is the only prey we’ve seen.”

Tawnypelt could feel sympathy for Birchfeather rushing through her like a warm greenleaf stream. As his kin, she wanted to give him the squirrel. But as a loyal ShadowClan warrior, she knew that was impossible. It was ShadowClan’s prey.

“I’m sorry,” she meowed, “but I can’t let you take the squirrel. And even if I did, you couldn’t claim it for your task, because you didn’t catch it. Still,” she added with a comforting purr, “I’m sure you’ll find something else.”

There was a growl in Ridgeglow’s throat as she spoke. “You try hunting on SkyClan territory these days and then say that.” She turned away with a huff of annoyance; Tawnypelt picked up a hint of desperation, too.

Birchfeather’s expression was disappointed as he gazed at Tawnypelt, but there was understanding in his eyes. “We’d better be going,” he mewed. “We have to catch *something* between now and sunset.”

“I wish you the best of luck,” Tawnypelt responded.

She watched, still torn, as Birchfeather padded over to where Ridgeglow was waiting and rested his tail on her shoulder for a moment, before both cats disappeared into the undergrowth.

Letting out a long sigh, Tawnypelt turned back to her own territory, intending to collect her prey and find the rest of the hunting patrol. But before she reached the squirrel, she spotted a rabbit pop suddenly out of a bramble thicket and start browsing on a patch of chervil.

Swiftly Tawnypelt checked the directions and worked her way closer to the brambles before letting out a fearsome yowl and lunging at the rabbit. Terrified, it took off, fleeing toward the border; Tawnypelt chased it, making sure not to catch it, until it crossed into SkyClan and dived into the same patch of undergrowth where Birchfeather and Ridgeglow had just vanished.

Tawnypelt heard the rustle of leaves and saw a low-growing branch bouncing up and down. A heartbeat later Birchfeather’s voice rose triumphantly. “I got it!”

Turning away, Tawnypelt couldn’t resist a purr of satisfaction. *Birchfeather will pass his trial, and SkyClan will eat better today.*

But as she went to pick up her squirrel, Tawnypelt spotted Yarrowleaf watching her from the shadows beneath a holly bush. Obviously she had seen what Tawnypelt had done. She didn’t say anything, but she looked at Tawnypelt with her nose wrinkled as if she had smelled something foul.

"I caught a squirrel," Tawnypelt meowed, feeling stupid. *Should I explain why I chased the rabbit off?* she wondered, then decided not to. Yarrowleaf's expression told her she wouldn't get a sympathetic hearing.

Yarrowleaf still didn't say a word, just turned away and stalked toward the place where the patrol had arranged to meet.

Tawnypelt crouched near the fresh-kill pile, picking listlessly at a piece of the squirrel. The walk back to camp had been silent, the air as tense as if a storm was brewing. As soon as the patrol reached the camp, Yarrowleaf had run straight across to the leader's den to talk to Tigerstar.

I'm in trouble for sure, Tawnypelt thought.

She had never managed to feel comfortable being rebuked by her Clan leader, who was also her son. She had raised him, yet he had the power now. It had been a humbling experience to give up her authority.

Tawnypelt only hoped that Yarrowleaf had arrived too late to see Ridgeglow leaping across the border to attack Tawnypelt. If she had, and if she told Tigerstar, their Clan leader would be bound to complain to Leafstar, and the young she-cat would be in trouble.

And that will upset Birchfeather.

After a few moments, Yarrowleaf emerged and headed toward the warriors' den. Tigerstar followed her out and let his gaze travel around the camp until he fixed it on Tawnypelt.

"Come here," he called, beckoning with his tail. "I need a word with you in private."

Bracing herself for the scolding she knew was coming, Tawnypelt rose and padded across the camp to follow her leader into his den. They were alone; Tawnypelt guessed Dovewing was probably out hunting.

She felt her muscles tense as Tigerstar sat down in his nest, wrapped his tail around his paws, and stared at her with glowing amber eyes. Tawnypelt managed to meet his gaze, though she felt as tense and awkward as an apprentice hauled up for rule-breaking.

Tigerstar let the silence drag out for several heartbeats. "Yarrowleaf tells me you chased a rabbit onto SkyClan territory," he meowed at last. "Is that true?"

"I chased a rabbit, sure," Tawnypelt replied. "But it crossed the border before I could catch it. I'm not allowed to follow it there. I'm sorry, but I couldn't guess which way it would run, could I?"

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes. "Don't try to get cute with me," he growled. "An apprentice might make that mistake, but you're an experienced warrior, and I know exactly what you were doing. You were putting Birchfeather above your Clan, and that is disloyal."

The accusation roused a faint claw-scratch of guilt inside Tawnypelt, but her anger was far stronger. "What if I was?" she demanded. "He needs *some* cat looking after

him. You and Dovewing have abandoned him!”

Fury flared in Tigerstar’s eyes. “I’ll parent my own kit, thank you very much,” he snarled. “You’re overstepping, Tawnypelt. *And* breaking the warrior code while you’re doing it.” His voice was rising to a yowl; he paused and took a breath. “I’m not abandoning Birchfeather,” he continued more quietly. “I’m hoping he’ll return, either because he changes his mind or because he fails his trials. And when you helped him with his trial, you made that much less likely. What were you thinking?” he demanded. “Do you *want* him to leave?”

Tawnypelt couldn’t find the words to reply. *I never thought of it that way.*

“You must be punished,” Tigerstar went on, “or the other cats will think I’m favoring you because you’re my kin. You can do the night guard for the next quarter moon—maybe sitting there on your own will give you time to think about how you can better serve your Clan.”

His stern voice and expression didn’t encourage Tawnypelt to protest. Besides, she knew she deserved it, and she was thankful the punishment was no worse. “Very well, Tigerstar,” she mewed, dipping her head respectfully before leaving the den.

Padding over to the warriors’ den, hoping for a brief nap before she went on duty, Tawnypelt wondered what her Clanmates would think. Then she decided that she didn’t care. There was no cat here whom she respected as much as she did Crowfeather. With Rowanclaw gone, there was no cat left in ShadowClan who understood her.

Chapter 17

Like a twig bobbing along the surface of a stream, Leafstar rose out of unconsciousness only to slip back again. For a while she thought she was back in the gorge with Echosong, celebrating a victorious hunt with her old Clanmates.

"That was a brilliant catch," she mewed to Sharpclaw over the rabbit she was sharing with him. "The rabbit never knew what hit it."

Sharpclaw twitched his ears. "Bouncefire and Ebonyclaw did well too," he responded.

Yes, Leafstar thought. *All my Clanmates do well. . . .*

Then the peaceful scene faded; she was battling Darktail and his rogues, watching blood from injured SkyClan cats spill onto the ground on that terrible night when SkyClan was driven from their home. She could hear Stormheart's dying screech.

"Traitor!" That was Hawkwing's voice, confronting the rogue leader. "Traitor! I trusted you!

Then the sounds of battle died away. Now dogs were chasing Leafstar from one of the makeshift camps where her Clan had lived on their journey from the gorge to the lake. And after that she was building yet another camp, exhausted, on what was now ShadowClan territory.

Will we ever find a home where we can settle? she wondered.

Finally she found herself staring into a deep, dark gap between two boulders. She crept forward to take a closer look, but Echosong's voice sounded behind her. "Leafstar! Leafstar!"

Leafstar halted. The dark space seemed to be calling to her, and she didn't know whether she was fascinated or afraid. Echosong called her name again, and suddenly the sky above Leafstar's head was filled with a dazzle of stars.

Blinking against the light, Leafstar opened her eyes and found herself in the medicine cats' den. Hawkwing stood in front of her, and she realized he was the cat who had called her name.

For a moment Leafstar tried to cling to the shreds of her dream, to the image of the two boulders and the dark space between. She didn't understand it. All the other scenes had been part of her past, but she couldn't recall this last one.

"Are you okay, Leafstar?" Hawkwing asked.

"I'm fine." Leafstar let the dream go and winced as she pushed herself up into a sitting position. "Still sore, but the pain isn't nearly so bad."

"Good." Hawkwing sounded approving, but Leafstar noticed that her deputy wouldn't meet her eyes. "You gave us quite a scare," he continued, finally raising his head to look at her. "You're needed outside."

Before Leafstar could ask why, Hawkwing quickly turned and left the den.

Leafstar struggled out of her nest and shook scraps of moss and leaves from her pelt. She noticed that her wounds were healing, looking clean and healthy, and wondered how long she had been lying there, asleep. It had been a while, she knew, with Frecklewish and Fidgetflake tending to her.

It was mouse-brained to hunt on my own, she thought. *I won't do that again in a hurry.*

Stepping outside, Leafstar noticed that the camp had never been in better shape. Everything was tidy, and there were new patches in some of the den walls. Even more surprising, the fresh-kill pile was about half full; Leafstar drew in its scent and realized it was all healthy prey, and none of the fish her Clanmates despised so much.

How has Hawkwing managed it? she asked herself. She could still hear the roaring from the Twoleg den, and she had no reason to think that the stream was flowing clean again—so how had her deputy organized successful hunting patrols?

It looked as if the whole Clan had gathered near the fresh-kill pile. Leafstar padded over to them, looking from Clanmate to Clanmate, but no cat would meet her gaze, staring at their paws or watching the flight of a bird across the camp. Some of them appeared deeply uncomfortable, as if they were about to vomit.

Reedclaw stepped out of the crowd and stared directly at Leafstar. "I don't like this," she began, "but because of what happened recently, I can't accept you as a fit leader. I've decided that for the good of the Clan I have to give every cat another chance to depose you."

Leafstar felt a sense of recognition. *This* was why she had felt so uneasy since she was brought back to camp after her disastrous hunt. Part of her had known this was coming. But it still hurt. She could only hope that she would survive this vote, as she survived the one before.

"That is your right," she told Reedclaw, hoping the younger cat could see forgiveness in her eyes. "But I hope you all know that nothing matters to me more than SkyClan, and there's nothing I wouldn't do to keep you safe."

"Your love for SkyClan isn't in question." Reedclaw responded. For a brief moment there was kindness in her tone, but it was soon gone, conviction and hostility turning her voice harsh again. "But your ability to lead us *is*. Remember what happened when you led that patrol out to drive off the badger. You mistook Starlingpaw for a badger, and my kit, Kitescratch, died in the chaos.

"Then later you went to hunt alone, and you were injured so badly that we had to rescue you. For three days, Hawkwing was sending out patrol after patrol. We're all happy that you're safe, but who knows how much prey went uncaught while your Clanmates were searching for you?"

Leafstar wanted to protest, but she couldn't. Reedclaw was right; she had been incredibly bee-brained to go out alone.

"You're getting older," Reedclaw went on. "I respect you greatly, but your senses aren't as sharp as they once were. You seem to have trouble seeing, and you aren't as

sure-pawed as when we arrived here at the lake. I know StarClan gave you nine lives. But I believe you can't lead us effectively anymore."

There was a stir of movement among the Clan as Reedclaw finished speaking. Cats were exchanging glances, sharing murmured comments, and Leafstar could tell by their tone that not all of them agreed with Reedclaw. That gave her confidence to raise her voice and address her Clan.

"I may be older," she began, "but that only means I am wiser. SkyClan's leader has more wisdom than any of the other Clans' leaders, even if they are more active. Doesn't that give us an advantage? It's true, I'm not as quick or as sure-pawed as I once was, but there are so many other cats in the Clan, including Hawkwing, who are. StarClan gave me nine lives, and I can still be an effective leader while I rely on other cats to use their skills." She hesitated, unsure what she wanted to say next, then added, "It was a mistake to go hunting alone—though it's no more than every cat has done from time to time. I regret it, but I needed to clear my head. It hurts when my Clanmates treat me like I'm not capable."

"But *are* you capable?" Needleclaw meowed. Every cat turned their head toward her, their paws shifting awkwardly, as if none of them would have dared to ask that question. "No cat wants to say this," she went on, "but Hawkwing disposed of those badgers in a single patrol. Since you've been injured, the fresh-kill pile gets bigger every day. The camp has never looked better. The warriors are working together. I admit you were a fine leader," Needleclaw declared with a dip of her head, "the only leader the revived SkyClan has ever had, and we couldn't have hoped for a better one. But perhaps all of us need to admit that your day is over, and it's time for a new leader."

A few cries of protest came from the crowd of cats, and Hawkwing stepped forward to stand beside Leafstar.

"I was chosen as deputy to do exactly what Needleclaw has said," he meowed. "I don't want to be seen as an alternative to Leafstar. I'm her helper, her supporter. Not her replacement."

Since her discussion with Tree, Leafstar had worried that Hawkwing was trying to undermine her. But the firmness in his voice now, his certainty as he raked his glance over the assembled cats, banished her misgivings like fog in sunlight.

No Clan leader could have a better deputy.

"Perhaps we should be more respectful to Leafstar," Rootspring suggested gently, easing himself out of the crowd. "Think of everything she has done for the Clan since the day StarClan chose her. And who has the right, besides StarClan, to decide who our leader should be?"

"We do," Gravelnose retorted. "Ever since the warrior code was changed. And StarClan had a paw in that, didn't they?"

"Yes, why would they have given us that power if they didn't think we should use it?" Rabbitleap asked.

“Exactly,” Reedclaw agreed. “And that’s why we should get on with the vote. If not enough cats agree with me, this is all meaningless. All cats who want to keep Leafstar as leader, stand over here with her,” she went on. “The rest of you, come over here with me.” She stalked across the camp to stand beside the hawthorn bush that sheltered the warriors’ den.

Leafstar watched as the cats made their decision. *Three-quarters of the cats must agree with Reedclaw,* she thought. *And that must include the medicine cats.*

At first, she was hopeful. But as more and more cats left her side, a coldness seemed to spread through her body. She realized she had never seriously believed that her Clan would reject her.

Finally, only Hawkwing, Harrybrook, Rootspring, Tree, and Macgyver remained standing with her. Birchfeather, who had still not completed his tasks to become a SkyClan warrior, stood aside, staring at his paws. All the others had left her to join Reedclaw.

Great StarClan, that hurts so much.

“I love you, Leafstar,” Violetshine declared. “And I’ll always respect you as the magnificent leader you were. But I’m worried that you’ll hurt yourself if you go on as you have been. Won’t it be easier for you, more comfortable, to retire to the elders’ den and share your wisdom from there?”

“Will it be more comfortable for me?” Leafstar asked, an edge to her voice. “Or more comfortable for all of you?” Her question was met with an awkward silence.

“That isn’t fair,” Frecklewish protested, a look of genuine sorrow in her eyes. “Surely we’re allowed to look out for you? Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do as a medicine cat?”

“I suppose that’s true,” Leafstar responded. “And I’ll try to accept your opinion. Useless. Unfit to lead. I guess it wouldn’t matter so much if I didn’t feel I have seasons of leadership left in me.” The gazes of all the cats were trained on her now: some, like Reedclaw’s, accusing; others regretful; only a few, like Hawkwing’s and Rootspring’s, staunchly supportive. The attention made her feel thoroughly uncomfortable. “If that’s everything,” she continued, “I’m going back to my own den. I’m not so badly injured that I need to stay in the medicine cats’ den any longer. I just need to rest.”

In my dreams of the past, at least every cat respects me.

“But it’s not over,” Hawkwing reminded her as she turned away. “SkyClan has voted to depose you, but as I recall, all the other leaders have to agree too, at the Gathering tonight.”

Leafstar glanced up at the sky, where the full moon was already visible, and realized that was why her Clanmates had roused her to do this now. Her fate would be decided at that night’s Gathering. If the other leaders agreed, her medicine cats would present their case to StarClan, and try to convince StarClan to strip her of her nine lives.

How delightful.

“I look forward to it,” she meowed, padding back to her den without turning to face her Clanmates.

Leafstar stalked across the clearing and clawed her way into the branches of the Great Oak. The journey around the lake with her Clanmates had been more awkward than she could have imagined. No cat had wanted to talk to her or look her in the eye. She felt as though she was complicating things simply by being there.

Her wounds ached terribly, especially after the effort of climbing into the tree, but it was no worse than the pain of knowing that her Clanmates had turned on her, and that her fitness to be leader was about to be dissected and discussed in front of every cat.

The Gathering began in the usual way, with the other four Clans passing on their news. Leafstar made sure that she was left for last.

Finally Tigerstar turned toward her. “Leafstar, what have you to report from SkyClan?”

Leafstar rose to her paws, but before she could speak, Reedclaw sprang up from where she sat below with the rest of the Clan. “SkyClan has voted to depose Leafstar,” she announced.

One massive gasp rose from the assembled cats; Leafstar could see their gaping jaws and their eyes stretched wide, all focused upon her. The other leaders turned toward her, shifting so that the oak branches didn’t obscure their view of her.

“Really?” Tigerstar’s voice was icy as he addressed Reedclaw. “Would you like to explain that?”

The ShadowClan leader’s demeanor didn’t intimidate Reedclaw. “SkyClan loves Leafstar, and will always respect her,” the tabby she-cat responded, “but we feel it’s in her own best interest for her to hand leadership over to Hawkwing. Her age has made it difficult for her to lead effectively.”

Silence followed Reedclaw’s words, until Icestar dipped her head to Leafstar and asked, “Has that been your experience, Leafstar? That your age prevents you from being an effective leader?”

“No,” Leafstar replied simply.

Tigerstar beckoned the other leaders with his tail, and they all moved along their branches until they were close enough to hold a low-voiced conversation. Meanwhile, below in the clearing, Reedclaw and her supporters in SkyClan also had their heads together. The rest of the gathered cats looked on in bewilderment; now and again they exchanged a few muttered words, but mostly their attention was fixed on the leaders.

Eventually Tigerstar stood tall on his branch and looked down at the assembled cats. “Reedclaw, can you give me some examples of Leafstar’s poor leadership?”

“She mistook an apprentice for a badger,” Reedclaw explained, looking delighted at the chance to list all Leafstar’s failings. “That led to an unnecessary death. Then she almost got herself killed going hunting alone in cold, icy weather. SkyClan has been hungry, because of all the Twoleg activity beyond our border, and Leafstar hasn’t been

able to keep the Clan fed. However, Hawkwing solved all our problems in days when he took over while Leafstar was recovering from her injuries."

Leafstar glanced down at Hawkwing and saw him flexing his claws uncomfortably in his place on the oak roots. His head was bowed so she couldn't see his face.

Tigerstar let his gaze travel across the cluster of SkyClan cats. "You seem confused about what makes a leader," he mewed silkily, "and what 'nine lives' means. Only StarClan has the authority to give or take a leader's nine lives."

"That's exactly what I would expect another leader to say," Needleclaw retorted, bouncing to her paws. "But the warrior code says differently. It was changed recently to give warriors the power to change leaders, and StarClan wouldn't have given us that power if they didn't want us to use it."

"SkyClan has voted," Hawkwing added, his voice heavy with regret. "For us to bring the matter to StarClan, according to the new code, the four other leaders have to agree."

There was dismay in the leaders' faces as they exchanged glances, as though they realized for the first time what a weighty decision they had to make. It all rested on them now, and Leafstar could understand how uncomfortable they must feel. They were not part of SkyClan, but as a leader she belonged with them.

Once again the four leaders put their heads together. Leafstar couldn't hear what they were saying, but their demeanor told her all she needed to know. Tigerstar was frigidly disapproving, Squirrelstar vehemently arguing—Leafstar guessed in her favor—while Icestar looked uncertain and Harestar simply confused. She realized that they weren't in agreement, and she would probably survive.

But is that what I really want? Is that what is best for me, and for my Clan? For all the Clans?

How could she lead her Clan when most of its warriors wanted her gone? And would Clan leaders who wanted to depose her be willing to work with her in the future? Might she cause dissension within the Clans? What would happen if the Clans had to work together against an outside threat like Darktail? Could she take the risk of weakening their response when the crisis came?

Leafstar took a deep breath. She realized that she didn't want the other leaders to decide SkyClan's fate. *This began in SkyClan; it should end in SkyClan.* She looked down at the assembled cats in the clearing, and then up at the full moon, shining through the branches of the Great Oak where a few withered leaves still clung.

I will never see this exact sight again.

Rising to her paws, she addressed the four other leaders. "This debate isn't necessary," she declared. "I have had time to think things over, and I believe my Clanmates are right. The camp has never looked better than it looks now under Hawkwing's leadership, and I haven't been able to solve the problem of the Twolegs. My senses have dulled, and my paws have lost their sureness. Perhaps my day has come

to an end. Perhaps, as more than one cat has said to me, I would be more comfortable retiring to the elders' den. I sincerely hope that SkyClan does better without me."

Cries of shock—and some protest—rose from the cats in the clearing below. The other leaders exchanged confused glances. Squirrelstar in particular seemed upset, distress in her brilliant green gaze as she looked at Leafstar, and they all seemed unsure of how to react to Leafstar's declaration. She was the first leader to be deposed under the new rules; she knew very well that her words had come as an unwelcome surprise. *Maybe,* she mused, *they're realizing that this could happen to any of them.*

Eventually Harestar rose to his paws and turned toward her, dipping his head in a sign of deepest respect. "Leafstar, I hope this decision will bring you happiness. You certainly deserve it, after all you have done for SkyClan."

Leafstar inclined her head in thanks, blinking in astonishment at the yowls of agreement that came from the cats below. Almost every cat had sprung to their paws, acclaiming her by calling her name. "Leafstar! Leafstar!"

Her throat felt choked up, and she could not find words to respond.

Eventually, when the noise was dying down, Hawkwing spoke from his place on the oak root. "I have massive respect for Leafstar," he declared, "and I will be grateful every day for her wisdom in the future. She has been a great leader, and I respect her decision. I will try to be even half the leader she has been, and I know I have large paw prints to fill. I promise that Leafstar will be a treasured Clanmate and elder for the rest of her life."

Silence followed his words. Leafstar sensed exhaustion among the cats, as if a great battle had been fought. Icestar was the first cat to speak.

"Then I declare this Gathering at an end. Leafstar, I suppose the decision lies with StarClan now, whether they take your nine lives. And may the spirits of our warrior ancestors guide your paws."

Chapter 18

Several days had passed since the loss and discovery of Sunkit, but Moonpaw was unable to shake off the memory, or surrender her feelings of fear and guilt. Although she knew that the kit had been safely returned to his mother's care in the nursery, she couldn't help thinking about what could have happened.

Suppose there had been a fox . . . or an owl . . .

Moonpaw was puzzling too over the way Sunkit had said she led him out of the nursery. She knew she hadn't done that; she had been asleep all night in the medicine cats' den. But somehow she couldn't shake off the feeling that she had been involved.

Or the orange cat was involved.

Because of that, Moonpaw had found it difficult to get through the days. She didn't want to spend too much time around other cats, but she was afraid of being alone. She never knew when the voice might show up again.

Her mind filled with thoughts of Sunkit, she had been too preoccupied to decide whether she wanted to stay as a medicine-cat apprentice or go back to training as a warrior.

If she had proven that the voice wasn't real, she had hoped to give up being a medicine cat. Now that she knew it was real, maybe she should commit herself to a life with Jayfeather and Alderheart. But she doubted that her voice had anything to do with StarClan, and she wasn't sure how effective she would be at anything as long as she still heard it.

Her behavior hadn't gone unnoticed. "I can understand that you're uneasy about what happened," Alderheart had meowed. "It's weird that Sunkit thought that you led him out of the nursery, even though every cat knows that you didn't. You need time to get back to normal. I'll just give you a bit of space."

Jayfeather, however, had pointed out that she couldn't let every close call with a kit send her into a flat spin. "Do *you* think you led Sunkit out of the nursery?" he asked.

Moonpaw stared at him. "No!" she responded indignantly. "I would *never* do that."

"Then it's time for you to get back to work," Jayfeather had told her, in a tone that didn't invite any disagreement.

Now Moonpaw was standing at the entrance to the medicine-cat den, just inside the bramble screen, while at the back of the den Jayfeather was preparing a new poultice for Cherryfall's wounds. The she-cat had been coming at sunset to have them freshened.

I wonder if this work is still for me, she asked herself. If she couldn't keep calm in a crisis and do what she had to do, maybe StarClan didn't intend for her to be a medicine cat.

"Are you going to stand in the entrance all day?" Jayfeather asked without even turning around. "Or are you going to come and help me?"

Usually Moonpaw was unnerved when the blind cat knew exactly where she was without being able to see her, but right now she was too lost in her thoughts of what had happened to Sunkit to be rattled by Jayfeather.

She padded to the back of the den and began clearing up the debris of stems and broken bits from the poultice Jayfeather was making and returning the spare leaves to the store. Then, after a couple of heartbeats, Jayfeather stopped and turned to face her.

"Well, are you going to tell me what's bothering you?" he demanded. "I'd rather listen to that than have you ruining all my hard work."

Looking down, Moonpaw realized that she had been mixing up the marigold with the elder leaves. *I never do that!* she thought with a gasp. Jayfeather was hard on her sometimes, but he'd praised how quickly she had learned how to identify and sort herbs. Now he could probably smell that the scents were getting muddled.

"Sorry," Moonpaw mewed, swiftly picking out the marigold stems and putting them in their own pile.

"That's okay," Jayfeather grunted, then added, "Moonpaw, just what is going on with you?"

For a moment Moonpaw was silent. *What* is *going on with me?* She had thought and thought about what she was experiencing, trying to convince herself that her voice was nothing like the one Shadowsight had heard, the one that had led him so terribly astray. She couldn't say it had made any demands, except for her attention. Still, she was troubled by what had happened to Sunkit, and she couldn't explain why the kit had thought he saw her in the middle of the night.

The voice couldn't explain it, either. *Silly kits—who knows why they say the things they do?*

Moonpaw felt a terrible cold weight in the pit of her belly every time she remembered that night. Still, she couldn't pretend any longer that the voice was only her imagination, or that it was a true vision from StarClan; being a medicine cat wasn't helping her at all with understanding it or learning to live with it.

"The truth is, Jayfeather," she began nervously, "my heart really isn't in becoming a medicine cat anymore."

Jayfeather's ears twitched, but he gave no other sign of surprise. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Because if you change your mind again later, I'm not going to be too easy on you."

"I'm sure," Moonpaw responded.

"In that case," Jayfeather told her, "you need to go and find Sunbeam and ask her if she'll be your mentor again."

Moonpaw thought that over. She couldn't imagine that Sunbeam would be pleased with her for changing her mind yet again. "Maybe she won't accept me," she mewed worriedly.

"If you're mature enough to decide to be a warrior, you should be brave enough to face your mentor," Jayfeather told her. There was no sympathy in his voice, but a

certainty that Moonpaw couldn't argue with.

Her paws dragging a little, she made her way to the warriors' den. Although she had no wish to change her mind, she still regretted what she was leaving behind. She was proud of how quickly she had learned about the herbs and their uses, and she enjoyed helping sick or injured cats. Alderheart's warmth and friendliness were important to her, and perhaps even more important, Jayfeather's scathing tones and his refusal to accept anything but her best work.

I'll still see them in camp, but it won't be the same as working with them.

As she approached the warriors' den, Moonpaw felt a flutter of nervousness in her belly. She wondered what would happen to her if Sunbeam refused to take her back as an apprentice. Maybe Squirrelstar would assign her to some other cat, but it was Sunbeam she really wanted; she liked and admired her so much.

What am I going to say?

When she poked her head through the branches of the den, Moonpaw spotted Sunbeam a few tail-lengths away, talking quietly with Nightheart. "Sunbeam!" she called, not wanting to enter the den without permission.

Sunbeam turned toward her; Moonpaw was relieved to see that her eyes were friendly. "Yes? What is it?"

"Could I speak to you, please?" Moonpaw asked. "Alone."

Sunbeam exchanged a glance with Nightheart, then rose to her paws. "Of course," she mewed. She padded across the den.

Moonpaw withdrew, and a heartbeat later Sunbeam emerged at her side. "Well?" she asked, tilting her head inquiringly.

"I . . . I've realized that I'm not supposed to be a medicine cat," Moonpaw stammered. "I'd like to be your apprentice again. Please."

Sunbeam's gaze traveled over her, curious and a little disbelieving. "You had potential as a warrior," she mused, letting her gaze flit to and fro while she considered Moonpaw's request. The long pause set Moonpaw's heart pounding. "But you weren't as focused as you needed to be," Sunbeam continued at last. "How can I be sure that you'll be dedicated this time?"

Moonpaw knew she deserved the criticism. She thought about the voice and the image she had seen, first in the lake and then in the Moonpool. *No wonder I was distracted!* But this time, Moonpaw thought, perhaps the best way to stop the voice would be to ignore it and throw herself wholeheartedly into her warrior training. If she did that, she would be too preoccupied to hear any voice but Sunbeam's—and that other voice, which she still tried hard to believe wasn't real (even though she knew it was) would go away.

"I promise, Sunbeam," she meowed fervently, "if you take me back, I'll be the most focused, dedicated warrior apprentice you've ever seen."

Sunbeam considered for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Very well," she responded. "I'll take you on again as my apprentice. But I warn you—if I catch you

daydreaming or not paying attention, if I see you distracted from what I'm trying to teach you, if you make me regret being your mentor in any way, I'll have Squirrelstar reassign you faster than you can say 'kittypet.' Have I made myself clear?"

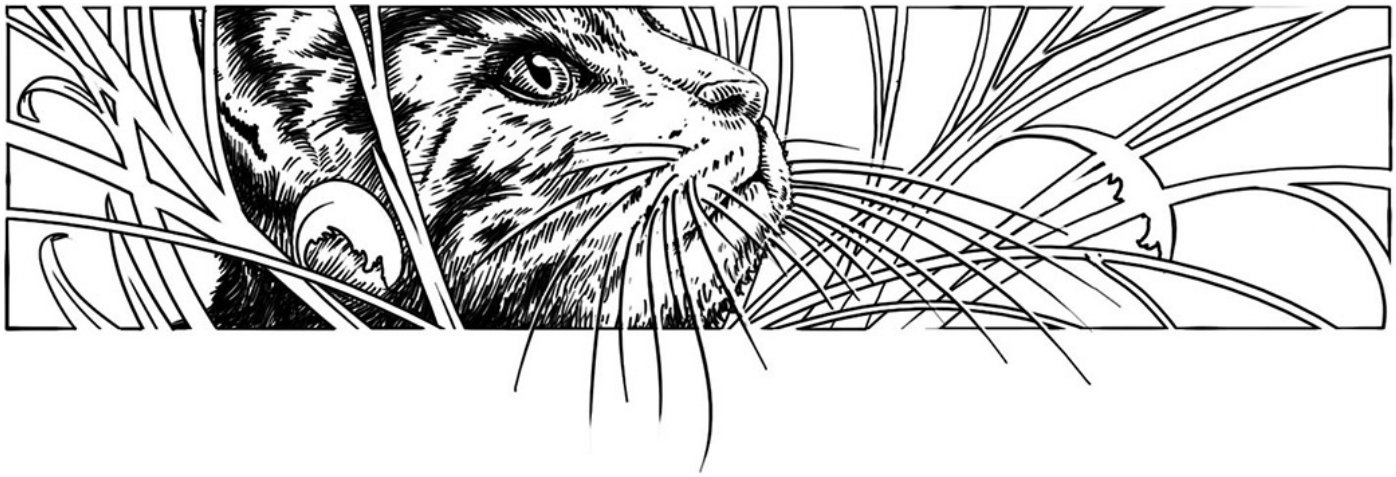
Moonpaw nodded vigorously. "Very clear, Sunbeam."

"Then I'll see you out here at dawn tomorrow. We'll start with some hunting practice."

Moonpaw felt a burst of joy inside. She wanted to bounce up and down like an excited kit, but instead she dipped her head respectfully and mewed, "Thank you, Sunbeam. I'll be here."

As Moonpaw padded back to the medicine cats' den to tell Jayfeather that she was officially a warrior apprentice again, her excitement began to fade. She thought of all the ways she could let Sunbeam down. What if she couldn't block out the voice? Jayfeather had told her that Shadowsight had been unable to do it. And although Shadowsight looked frail, he had a strong and capable mind. If he hadn't been able to keep the evil Ashfur at bay, what hope did she have?

Moonpaw shook her head. No, she decided. She would ignore the voice and put everything else behind her, no matter what. She would focus on becoming a great warrior, and nothing else.



Chapter 19

It had been a long time since Tawnypelt had been assigned to night guard duty. She had forgotten how mind-numbingly boring it was with most cats asleep: no cat to chat with, nothing interesting going on in camp, and in the present state of peace, very little chance of trouble.

But at least, she thought, *it gets me away from Tigerstar.*

She understood Tigerstar's reasoning about Birchfeather, but that didn't mean she had to like it. And it wasn't only Tigerstar. She couldn't remember how long it had been since she had felt comfortable with any of her Clanmates.

Is this how it will be, until I go to hunt with StarClan?

Shifting to a more comfortable position at the camp entrance, she went over the scene with Birchfeather in her mind, wondering whether she should have—or could have—done anything differently. She recalled chasing the rabbit through the undergrowth, fallen leaves crackling beneath her paws. . . .

Gradually she became aware that she was surrounded by all her Clanmates. Every cat looked weary, their heads down and their tails drooping, as they crossed bleak terrain, where the few trees were becoming even more sparse. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the familiar wooded hills of the old forest where she had been born.

Where are we? she wondered. This didn't look like anywhere they had passed through on the Great Journey. *And where are we going?*

In front of her rose a steep slope. Trudging to the top of it, Tawnypelt looked down on the familiar lake, the streams and woods and moorland where the Clans had settled. She remembered this day, when they'd arrived there and discovered the place where they would make their new home.

Then a grumbling sound broke the silence, growing louder and louder until the air pulsed with it and the ground seemed to shake. Staring around, Tawnypelt spotted a huge monster with hard silver teeth, pulling a tree up by its roots.

Wait! she thought, struggling to repress panic. *That didn't happen by the lake.*

From ShadowClan territory, she and her Clanmates had only heard the roaring sound. The monsters were working farther away, beyond SkyClan. But now she could see the monster and a Twoleg den rising from the ground within a shining mesh like the bones of a skeleton. And just under the ear-crushing rumble she could hear the terrified mewing of a cat.

A kit is in trouble!

The sudden shock of fear startled Tawnypelt awake, and she remembered where she was, safe inside the camp. The sound of the monster was gone, and the surrounding woods were quiet except for the creaking of branches and a distant shriek that suggested an owl had taken its prey.

Thank StarClan no cat caught me sleeping on duty!

But Tawnypelt still felt uneasy, as if something was terribly wrong, or soon would be. And she guessed it might be connected with whatever the Twolegs were up to. The noise, the den the Twolegs were building, had caused her massive stress ever since it began. That was probably why she had dreamed about it, and why it had made her so upset.

She suspected that her Clanmates would think she was mouse-brained to be so rattled over a dream, but what worried Tawnypelt was more than that. Twolegs building dens near Clan territory *was* dangerous; she knew that from her own experience, when the Clans were driven out of the old forest. But she seemed to be the only ShadowClan cat who was concerned.

Tawnypelt hoped that her Clanmates were right, but her instincts were telling her something different. In case she was justified in worrying, she felt that she ought to check out the Twoleg building place, just to be on the safe side.

She was still trying to shake the feeling of dread out of her pelt when she noticed that she could see the outlines of the trees, sharp against the sky. Dawn was coming.

It was not long before the light strengthened and warriors began to emerge from their den. The dawn border patrol—Lightleap, Sparrowtail, and Gullswoop—passed her with a murmured greeting and padded out into the forest. Across the camp, Cloverfoot was organizing the hunting patrols, and soon Flaxfoot appeared from the den and bounded across the camp to Tawnypelt's side.

"Hi," he mewed. "I'm here to relieve you. You can go and get some rest."

"Thanks, Flaxfoot."

Tawnypelt would have liked to curl up in her nest, but she had something more urgent to do, something she needed to see.

When Flaxfoot's head was turned away, Tawnypelt whisked out through the bushes and darted into the trees. Keeping her senses alert—not for prey this time, but for signs of ShadowClan patrols—she headed toward the unclaimed territory where the Twolegs were building.

Tawnypelt wasn't sure why she had dreamed about the journey from the old forest to the lake and about the new Twoleg den, but somehow the two were connected, and the monster bound them together. She felt disturbed, as if ants were crawling through her pelt, because she couldn't put her paw on the connection, or why it made her so unsettled. She hoped that if she could see the place for herself, she would be able to work it out.

The pale light of dawn had taken on a golden tinge, casting deep shadows over the forest floor; the sun had risen. Cautiously Tawnypelt approached the ShadowClan border, aware that sooner or later a patrol would be coming this way. But the scent she drew in was stale; they weren't here yet.

Tawnypelt followed the border, heading toward the edge of SkyClan territory. She hadn't gone more than a few fox-lengths when she heard a rustling in the bushes on the

SkyClan side. She paused warily, making sure she was well inside her own territory, when a familiar cat emerged from the undergrowth.

"Birchfeather!" she exclaimed.

"Tawnypelt, greetings." Birchfeather padded up to the border. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you that," Tawnypelt responded. "Why are you out here by yourself?"

"Oh, I'm doing the dawn patrol," Birchfeather told her. "It's one of my trials, to do it on my own. What's your excuse?"

Tawnypelt hesitated, wondering how her young kin would react if she told him her reason, then realized there was no point in lying. "I know this is going to sound bee-brained," she began, "but I had a bad dream about the Twolegplace just outside your territory. In the dream there was a cat in trouble, and I just need to see it for myself to make sure it isn't true."

As she spoke, a concerned expression settled on Birchfeather's face. "It's dangerous for you to go there by yourself," he meowed. "You shouldn't venture there alone."

"I'll be fine," Tawnypelt insisted.

"Maybe." Birchfeather didn't sound convinced. "In any case, I'm coming with you."

Tawnypelt felt warmth spreading through her fur at the thought of the young tom's company. But she wasn't sure she could accept it. "Won't you get into trouble for leaving your trial?" she protested.

"Oh, I have lots of time before any cat comes to check on me," Birchfeather assured her. "We'll be quick."

Side by side, Tawnypelt and Birchfeather headed out of Clan territory and kept going until the blue wall loomed in front of them. Everything was quiet; Tawnypelt realized it was too early for the Twolegs to be there.

"We need to get inside," Tawnypelt mewed.

She began to follow the blue wall. The part of it that was sometimes drawn back was closed now, but a little farther along, Tawnypelt spotted a place where the earth fell away, leaving a narrow gap underneath the wall.

"I think I can get through there," she declared. "Birchfeather, do you want to stay out here and keep watch?"

"No, I'll come too," the young tom replied. "You have no idea what you might find in there."

Secretly relieved, Tawnypelt lay down on her belly and began wriggling through the gap, feeling the bottom of the wall scrape along her spine. For a terrifying moment she thought she was stuck; scrabbling wildly with fore and hind paws she gave one massive squirm and popped out on the other side.

For an instant there I felt like Squirrelstar, she thought, a spasm of laughter in her belly. *She got stuck so many times on our journey to the sun-drown-water.*

As she was shaking soil out of her pelt, Birchfeather, who was still not fully grown, slid through more easily and stood looking around. "What now?" he asked.

Close by was a monster similar to the one Tawnypelt had seen in her dream. It was motionless, apparently asleep, but that didn't mean it wasn't dangerous.

She and Birchfeather padded forward as quietly as if they were searching for prey. Tawnypelt's ears were pricked as she listened hard for a cat crying out in pain or fear.

"I can't hear anything," Birchfeather murmured after a few heartbeats. "Let's go."

Tawnypelt shook her head. "We need to search properly. Let's split up; we'll cover more ground that way."

"I thought this was supposed to be quick," Birchfeather responded with a heavy sigh. Then, with no more protest, he veered off in a direction that would take him around the back of the Twoleg structure.

Tawnypelt padded on, leaping the stream and stopping every few paw steps to listen and taste the air for cat-scent. Soon she noticed a stack of long, shiny things with a hole running along the length; they reminded her of the long, shiny, hollow logs that she had sometimes seen around Twoleg dens. Near the stack was a mound of earth, freshly dug from the deep hole beside it.

Could there be a cat trapped underneath the logs?

Tawnypelt crept closer, sniffing the air and calling out with soft meows. She thought she heard something and paused, but the sound wasn't repeated. *Maybe I'm imagining things.*

Carefully, testing every paw step before she put her weight on it, Tawnypelt climbed to the top of the stack of logs. Looking around when she was at the top, she spotted a mouse scurrying out of one of the holes at the bottom.

"Mouse dung!" she muttered. "Is that what I heard?"

She began to feel as if she were completely bee-brained. She had just had a dream, and she was taking it far too seriously.

Let's get out of here so Birchfeather can finish his task.

She began to climb down, but as she did so, something shifted beneath her paws. With a lurch of terror she realized that the stack of logs was falling apart, and they were beginning to cascade down, taking Tawnypelt with them. Letting out a panic-stricken yowl, she tried to leap clear, but there was no stable place for her to jump off. She had to struggle to stay on her paws, knowing that if she fell, she would be crushed.

Several of the logs barreled into the mound of earth, which went spraying up into the sky. The cloud spattered into Tawnypelt's eyes, stinging them and blinding her; she couldn't see anything beyond her own nose.

Her terror rising with every heartbeat, Tawnypelt stumbled around, trying to find a way to get clear of the collapsing heap. "Birchfeather!" she screeched in panic.

In the distance she heard Birchfeather respond, but in the same heartbeat the logs gave way beneath her hind paws and she realized she was falling into the hole. Scrabbling with her forepaws, she tried to dig her claws into the earth and drag herself clear, but it was no use. There was nothing solid for her to cling to. She felt herself

tumbling, down and down; Birchfeather was yowling her name, and farther away she could hear Twoleg voices and a monster roaring to life.

Before darkness surged around her, Tawnypelt had a horrible realization: the cat in trouble, the cat she had dreamed about, was her.

Chapter 20

Moonpaw made sure that her pelt was groomed perfectly before she left the medicine cats' den the following morning. Above the stone hollow the trees were visible, outlined against the pale dawn sky, and there was a frosty tang in the air.

Flipclaw and Finleap were padding toward the thorn tunnel, followed by their apprentices, while Sunbeam stood in the center of the camp, looking around.

Moonpaw bounded over to her. *Am I late already?*

But Sunbeam didn't seem angry. "Good morning, Moonpaw," she meowed. "Let's go."

They caught up to the other four cats at the outside end of the tunnel. Flipclaw was in the lead, heading toward the old Thunderpath; he halted and turned as Moonpaw and Sunbeam emerged into the open.

"Hi, Moonpaw," he greeted her, then turned to Sunbeam. "She made it, then."

Sunbeam's response was a brisk nod.

Meanwhile Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were staring at Moonpaw as if she had just popped out of the ground like a rabbit from its burrow.

"What are you doing here?" Shinepaw asked.

Moonpaw wished she *had* popped out of the ground so she could crawl back in again. "I . . . I'm a warrior apprentice again," she mewed, her pelt hot with embarrassment.

"Being a medicine cat didn't work out, then?" Goldenpaw was regarding her curiously. "Did Jayfeather throw you out?"

Moonpaw felt her shoulder fur begin to bristle, but Sunbeam spoke before she could find words to reply.

"No, Goldenpaw, Jayfeather was very pleased with her." Sunbeam's tones were sharp. "She just felt that her paws were leading her down the wrong path."

"So let's have no more mouse-brained questions," Finleap, Goldenpaw's mentor, snapped.

Goldenpaw ducked his head. "Sorry, Moonpaw."

"It's great having you with us again," Shinepaw added.

Moonpaw relaxed. She had wondered how the other apprentices would react when she joined them again, but she was hopeful that everything would be okay. They had been good friends in the nursery, almost like littermates, and she hoped they could be good friends again.

"Okay," Flipclaw meowed, gathering the group together with a whisk of his tail. "This morning we're going to hunt, and we'll see how much prey we can catch to feed the Clan."

Goldenpaw and Shinepaw exchanged an eager glance, while Moonpaw's heart seemed to sink into her paws. *What if I can't catch anything?* She felt awkward, knowing that she would be so far behind the other apprentices.

"Don't worry about bringing back prey," Sunbeam told her, as if she had guessed Moonpaw's thoughts. "This morning we'll go over your hunting moves and see how much you remember."

Moonpaw nodded. *I'll really try to concentrate this time,* she promised herself. When she was getting ready to leave the medicine cats' den, the voice had found plenty to say about it, mostly along the lines of *I told you so,* but Moonpaw had steadfastly ignored it, and by now it had grown quiet.

She was reassured that her mentor wasn't expecting too much on her first day. *All the same, it would be nice to catch something.* Determined to make her mentor proud, she followed in Sunbeam's paw steps as they headed toward the old Thunderpath.

"I'm sure you'll soon catch up with us," Goldenpaw remarked, his voice more friendly now. "Sunbeam is a great cat."

"Yes, I'm lucky she's my mentor," Moonpaw agreed.

"I know there's a lot to learn," Shinepaw meowed, padding beside Moonpaw on the other side from her littermate. "Do you know what I keep forgetting?" she went on. "The breeze. I never remember to check which way it's blowing. You *have* to do that, Moonpaw, every time."

"I still can't get my hunter's crouch right," Goldenpaw declared. "It's fine when I'm practicing, but when I actually want to stalk prey, it goes all over the place. It's like my hind paws don't know what my forepaws are doing!"

Moonpaw listened carefully. It was encouraging that the more experienced apprentices were still getting things wrong. She vowed to remember their advice when it was her turn to hunt.

By this time, the hunting party had reached the edge of the old Thunderpath. Finleap and Flipclaw beckoned their apprentices into the trees, though they were still nearby; Moonpaw could hear them brushing through the undergrowth, and once a loud exclamation of "Mouse dung!" from Goldenpaw.

"Okay," Sunbeam began, padding out into the middle of the grassy space. "Show me your hunter's crouch. The plants here don't grow so high, so I can easily see what you're doing."

At once Moonpaw dropped into the crouch, remembering how to position her paws, balance her weight, and keep her tail tucked in at her side. Sunbeam padded around her, gazing at her so intently that Moonpaw thought she must be examining every separate hair on her pelt.

"That's very good," Sunbeam meowed at last, sounding slightly surprised. "Okay, let's see you stalk."

Moonpaw crept forward, paw step by paw step. It was easier here, where the grass was short enough that she could easily see any betraying twigs or pebbles and avoid

them. She kept up her concentration, trying to thrust to the back of her mind the fear that the voice would speak and distract her.

Then, a little way farther along the Thunderpath, Moonpaw saw a rabbit emerge from the undergrowth and start to cross, only to pause halfway and begin nibbling at a patch of dandelion leaves.

Out of the corner of her eye Moonpaw spotted Sunbeam drop to the ground and heard her mentor murmur, "Go for it."

Moonpaw's heart was thrumming in her chest as she crept silently toward her prey. *Oh, StarClan, please let me catch it!*

A faint breeze was blowing from the rabbit, carrying its scent toward her; without Shinepaw's warning, she might have forgotten to check. Moonpaw felt her jaws begin to water at the thought of the delicious flesh. She never took her gaze from her prey, which was turned half away from her and quite unaware of her approach.

When she was within leaping distance, she readied herself, drawing her hind legs under her and wriggling her haunches, until she took off in a massive pounce and landed right on top of the rabbit.

It let out a terrified squeal, flailing its legs as it struggled to escape. One powerful hind paw struck Moonpaw in the eye, and she almost lost her grip; she was half smothered by fur pressing into her face. Recovering, she dug her claws in tighter and managed to sink her teeth into the rabbit's throat. It gave one last spasm and lay still.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," Moonpaw gasped.

Looking up, she saw that Sunbeam was standing beside her, gazing down with an expression of mingled shock and approval. "I came to help," she meowed, "but you didn't need me, did you?"

Moonpaw scrambled to her paws. "It was easier on the short grass."

Sunbeam tilted her head. "Maybe. It's easier than stalking through undergrowth, but you didn't have any cover. You did everything right, Moonpaw. I'm proud of you."

A warm sense of achievement flooded Moonpaw from ears to tail-tip. The skills she had learned in her first apprenticeship had come back to her, and she began to believe that she could really become a warrior.

Following the scent of the rest of the patrol, Sunbeam left the old Thunderpath behind and thrust her way through the undergrowth, while Moonpaw struggled after her, carrying the rabbit. Eventually they emerged into a clearing, where the other cats were gathered and Finleap was digging a hole to hold the prey they had caught so far.

They all looked up as Sunbeam and Moonpaw emerged into the open.

"Hi, Sunbeam," Flipclaw began. "How did—great StarClan!" He was staring at Moonpaw's rabbit.

"Sunbeam, it was you who caught that, right?" Shinepaw asked.

Sunbeam shook her head. "No, it was Moonpaw. Her first day, too."

"Hey, watch it," Goldenpaw joked. "You're making the rest of us look bad."

Moonpaw responded with a purr of amusement as she dropped her catch beside Finleap's hole.

"Good job," he meowed, giving Moonpaw a friendly nod while Sunbeam looked on with approval in her eyes.

Whatever her Clanmates might say, Moonpaw had no intention of slowing down. Keeping her focus on her hunting moves and the prey she was stalking had worked well for her.

While she was waiting for Sunbeam to suggest where they might head next, Moonpaw heard a rustling beneath a nearby elder bush. None of her companions seemed to have heard it, so Moonpaw slid cautiously beneath the lowest branches. All her senses were alert, but she didn't pick up the least sound or scent of prey.

A leaf brushed against Moonpaw's ear; she spun around, but she couldn't see anything. While she was looking, something seemed to yank her tail. Moonpaw whipped around again, wondering if one of the other apprentices was teasing her, but there was still no cat in sight.

Then Moonpaw heard a soft giggle; it was in her mind, but all around her too.

Moonpaw felt as if a frosty wind were sweeping over her, enveloping her until she thought she was turning to ice. She could ignore the voice, but now it seemed able to touch her.

How?

Moonpaw didn't need an answer to know that this wasn't good. As she stood rigid, her breath coming in shallow gasps, she heard a mischievous *Play with me.* It was the voice, as clear as sunlight.

Moonpaw squeezed her eyes shut. *No, no, no* . . . She would not let the voice in. Not now, when everything was going so well. "No," she mewed aloud. "Go away."

Emerging from beneath the bush, Moonpaw padded over to rejoin the others. Finleap was scratching earth over the cache of prey, while the rest of the patrol spread out in a wide half circle, clearly stalking something.

Tasting the air, Moonpaw detected the scent of squirrel. Slipping into the correct hunting stance, she took her place with the rest of her Clanmates and began to follow along. As they headed into a wide stretch of fern, she lost sight of the others, but she could still hear them.

The hunt wasn't going well, she realized after a few moments. She heard Sunbeam mutter, "Mouse dung," while Flipclaw added, "Where has the wretched creature gone now?"

Whether the squirrel knew it was being stalked or not, Moonpaw guessed it was doing a good job of eluding its pursuers.

What about me? the voice asked, startling her as she tried to pinpoint the squirrel by its scent.

You aren't real, Moonpaw responded with deadly seriousness. While in her heart she knew that wasn't true, somehow she had to reject the voice and drive it away. She

had to concentrate on the hunt.

As Moonpaw reached the edge of the ferns, she still couldn't see the squirrel, and none of the other hunters were in sight. She was turning back to the ferns when something flickered in the corner of her eye.

Whipping around, she saw the squirrel shoot out of the fern cover and head for the nearest tree, streaking along the ground with its tail flying out behind it. Goldenpaw and Shinepaw appeared a heartbeat later, pelting along, but too far behind to catch the squirrel before it reached safety.

Instinctively Moonpaw launched herself into its path, colliding with the squirrel a fox-length away from the tree. Half stunned, she lashed out with her claws and managed to snag the squirrel's tail. It squealed and jerked away from her, trying to free itself, only to go limp as Goldenpaw and Shinepaw piled on top of it.

Panting, Moonpaw struggled to her paws, facing the other two apprentices.

"Great catch!" Shinepaw exclaimed. "Moonpaw, you're really fast!"

"It wasn't just my catch; it was all of us," Moonpaw protested.

"Yeah, we're a great team!" Goldenpaw declared.

Sunbeam and the rest of the patrol, drawn by the squirrel's squeal, emerged from various bushes and clumps of fern.

"Great StarClan, that was a good catch!" Flipclaw exclaimed.

"Yes, you all did a brilliant job," Sunbeam agreed, warmth in her voice and in her eyes.

Moonpaw felt as if her chest would burst with happiness: that she could hunt well and that the other apprentices had accepted her as one of them.

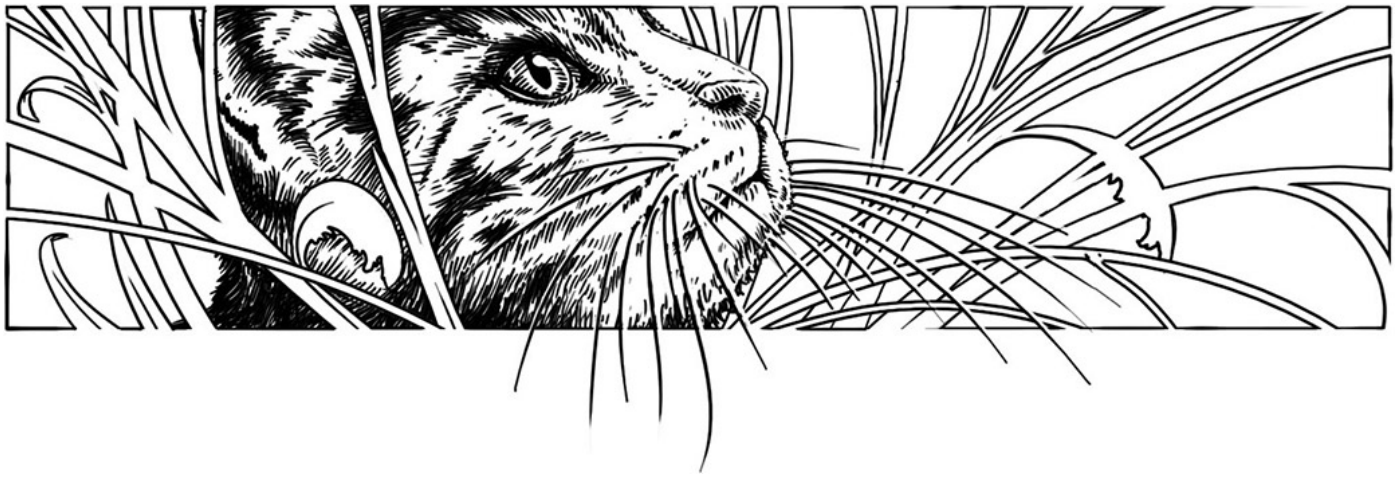
Heading back to collect the rest of their prey, Moonpaw padded along with her head held high and the limp body of the squirrel hanging from her jaws.

She could still hear the voice, but it was fading in the distance, as if it was watching Moonpaw stride away. Was that all she had to do? Moonpaw asked herself. Ignore it? If so, everything would be fine. There was nothing to worry about.

But as she and the rest of the patrol turned back toward the camp, Moonpaw heard a soft, plaintive mew.

That wasn't very nice of you. You can't ignore me forever.

We'll see about that, Moonpaw thought.



Chapter 21

Tawnypelt eased her eyes open. Instead of the pit of earth and rock she had fallen into, she saw open ground covered in lush green grass. Above her head the sky blazed with an impossible abundance of stars. The air itself seemed to shimmer.

"Oh no . . . ," Tawnypelt murmured. She knew immediately what had happened. "I died. I'm in StarClan."

As if to prove her right, her mate, Rowanclaw, appeared above her, his amber eyes shining, his fur glimmering with stars, just as he had appeared when she had dreamed about him beside the stream. "Greetings, Tawnypelt," he meowed.

A heartbeat later, Tawnypelt's long-lost daughter, Dawnpelt, and her son Flametail appeared on either side of her. Together they helped nudge her to her paws and steadied her until she felt her legs were strong enough for her to stand.

"Always the medicine cat," she purred affectionately to Flametail, who nuzzled her shoulder in reply.

Tawnypelt let out a sigh of relief. She had always thought dying would be terrifying, but all she felt now, gazing into the eyes of these three cats she loved so much, was comfort.

"I've longed to see you so much," she began. "I hadn't realized how much I missed you until now, seeing your faces again."

Before any cat could reply, Tawnypelt spotted Bluestar, the former leader of ThunderClan, pacing across the grass toward her. She had known Bluestar when she was a kit, and then a young apprentice, in ThunderClan. Then Bluestar had been old, tired, her mind shattered by Tigerclaw's treachery. Now she looked like a strong adult cat, with long, glossy fur and a frosty glitter at her paws and around her ears. Her eyes glowed like two small moons.

As the blue-furred cat halted in front of her, Tawnypelt dipped her head in deepest respect. "It's wonderful to be here, Bluestar," she declared.

Bluestar dipped her head in response. "I'm sorry, Tawnypelt," she meowed. "But you can't stay."

"What do you mean?" Tawnypelt asked, a shiver passing through her. *Surely she can't send me to the Dark Forest?*

"It isn't your time yet," Bluestar replied. "You are needed back in the living world. There is a great peril about to befall the Clans, and you have to be the one to help them."

"A-a great peril?" Tawnypelt stammered, relieved that at least she wouldn't be banished to the Place of No Stars. "What kind of peril? Please, Bluestar, you have to tell me!"

“The end of an era approaches,” Bluestar meowed solemnly. “Tawnypelt, you are the cat who must lead the Clans out of the moonless dark and onto a new path.”

The starry land around her seemed to swirl as Tawnypelt struggled with confusion. “What is that supposed to mean?” she demanded. “And why is this responsibility falling on me? I’m not a Clan leader.”

Bluestar’s gaze was kind, but filled with authority that would not be denied. “You need not be *the* leader to be *a* leader,” she pointed out. “The eldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot. You must not lose your way on the journey, even after the stars have faded away.”

Tawnypelt tried to suppress a spurt of anger at the StarClan cat’s obscure words. She suddenly felt more respect for the medicine cats, who routinely had to interpret StarClan’s guidance.

“No more riddles!” she insisted, unable to keep a sharp edge from her voice. “Are you calling me the eldest tree? What journey are you talking about? And why would the stars be fading?”

Bluestar showed no anger at Tawnypelt’s indignant tone. But she made no answer, either.

“Fine!” Tawnypelt snapped, her fur bristling and her claws flexing in frustration. “If you won’t answer my questions, I’ll just stay here. Let some other cat worry about Clan affairs.”

But as she finished speaking, Tawnypelt became aware of a pressure on her chest and a burning sensation in her lungs. The star-strewn sky, the lush grass of StarClan’s hunting grounds, the faces of her beloved kin, were fading fast.

Before everything disappeared completely, Bluestar leaned in close, her blue eyes blazing like twin stars. “Beware the two-faced cat with one paw in each world,” she mewed.

“What does that mean?” Tawnypelt pleaded.

In the same instant, she felt herself taking a huge gulp of air and opened her eyes to see Fidgetflake and Frecklewish gazing down at her with concern in their eyes.

Tawnypelt struggled to speak, partly because of shock, and partly because her mouth felt as though it were choked with earth, “Where am I?” she asked eventually.

“In our den, in the SkyClan camp,” Frecklewish explained. “You had a hard fall into the pit beside the Twoleg building, and you were covered with earth. Birchfeather ran here for help; Hawkwing and Violetshine went back with him, and the three of them managed to pull you out. You weren’t breathing, and they thought you were dead, but they brought you back here. We had to pounce on your chest several times; I guess you might have some bruised ribs.”

“Thank you,” Tawnypelt mewed hoarsely, trying hard to make sense of what had happened to her.

While Frecklewish was talking, Fidgetflake had slipped out of the den, and he returned now with a bundle of moss soaked in water. He held it to Tawnypelt’s lips; the

cool liquid filling her mouth and trickling down her throat was the most delicious thing she could remember tasting.

The water helped her revive enough to start recalling her time in StarClan. She had really died, but now she was back. Alive. *I'm so confused. . . .* But Tawnypelt knew one thing for sure: StarClan had sent her back with a mission, and she wasn't supposed to keep it to herself.

Why did they choose me? she asked herself. *Why not, say . . . Crowfeather?* She was certain that the WindClan deputy would know how to cope.

And then there was the warning Bluestar had given her in the very last moments before she was sent back from StarClan. The words sent a chill right through Tawnypelt's fur.

Beware the two-faced cat . . .

Who could Bluestar have been talking about? Tawnypelt wondered. Whoever it was, they sounded dangerous.

She tried to speak again, but her throat was still rough from swallowing earth. Fidgetflake held the soaked moss to her mouth again and let her drink deep. The water soothed her throat enough to let her speak.

"There's something I have to tell the Clans. I have to warn them. . . ."

But the energy Tawnypelt needed to speak just those few words drained her utterly. The faces of the medicine cats and the den walls blurred around her, and she plunged into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter 22

The sun was going down, and twilight crept into the warriors' den. Moonpaw was tidying the nests, gathering together scattered fern and moss, and plumping up the bedding so it would be soft and cozy when the warriors came to sleep.

"Hey, Moonpaw!"

Moonpaw looked up to see Shinepaw poking her head through the outer branches of the den, with Goldenpaw looking over her shoulder.

"You don't need to do that by yourself," Shinepaw continued. "You've surely earned some time to relax; that delicious rabbit we all shared was thanks to you."

"Yeah, you deserve some time off from boring old apprentice tasks," Goldenpaw agreed. "We'll help you with the nests, if you like."

Moonpaw shook her head; she was determined not to slack off. "That's fine, thanks," she responded. She admitted to herself that she would rather do the work alone. The more she had to do, the longer she would be too busy to let any intrusive voices in.

"Okay, we'll see you later," Shinepaw mewed, and the two apprentices withdrew.

Moonpaw trotted over to a pile of bedding she had collected earlier and began using it to pad out thin places in the nests, making sure there were no thorns before she patted it into place.

Someday an apprentice will do this for me, she thought.

As she imagined what it would be like to be a warrior, and to receive her warrior name from Squirrelstar in a ceremony with all the Clan looking on, Moonpaw felt something hit her on her shoulder. Guessing it was one of the apprentices, she looked up to tell them to knock it off, but no cat was there.

Huh . . . I guess something must have fallen from the top of the den, Moonpaw thought, reminding herself to check it later and warn her mentor; if there was a hole, she could bring some bramble tendrils or ivy stems to patch it up. For now she would finish tending the last few nests.

But when she went back to the pile of bedding, it was gone, all but a few scraps of moss and a single fern frond.

Moonpaw stared at the place where it had been. *I know there was plenty left. It was right there, by the entrance, just a moment ago. Wasn't it?*

Moonpaw was beginning to question herself. Perhaps she was more tired than she thought, and she needed a little time off after all.

While she was still standing there, puzzling, Sunbeam slipped into the den, halted, and looked around. "Wow, I've never seen the nests looking so tidy. Good job, Moonpaw."

Moonpaw ducked her head, embarrassed at the praise. "Is it okay if I go to sleep a bit early?" she asked her mentor. "I'm not feeling too well. I'll finish cleaning the den

as soon as I wake up."

"The den doesn't look as if it needs any more cleaning," Sunbeam assured her with a good-humored purr. "Maybe you've been overdoing it. You should just relax now. You've done excellent work today, and you've earned some rest. Off you go, and I hope you feel better in the morning."

"Thank you, Sunbeam," Moonpaw mewed.

"You know, Moonpaw," Sunbeam added, "I'm glad you came back as my apprentice. I had my doubts, I admit, but you've been so focused and helpful today that I'm sure you'll be ready for your warrior assessment in no time."

Embarrassed by the praise, Moonpaw ducked her head, wished her mentor good night, and scurried out of the den. She felt a warm glow inside her as she crossed the camp.

I was right to quit being a medicine-cat apprentice, she reflected. She missed Jayfeather and Alderheart, but at last she felt that her paws were leading her along the right path.

Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were nowhere to be seen, so Moonpaw was alone as she settled into her nest in the apprentices' den. Satisfaction filled her as she curled up and wrapped her tail over her nose; Sunbeam's kindness, her approval, warmed her heart.

But as Moonpaw sank into sleep, she found herself shivering, as if she was lying out in the cold leaf-bare forest instead of her cozy nest. She felt as though something cold was at her back; she could feel the weight of it, sliding in beside her, pressing against her, weighing her down. A cold breeze was blowing past her ear.

No, it wasn't a breeze. It was a breath. And in that breath came softly whispered words.

You can't run from me. We are one.

In a single heartbeat Moonpaw bolted out of her nest and let out a strangled cry as she scrambled through the ferns that sheltered the den. Looking wildly around, she spotted her parents, still awake and chatting with Ivypool and Twigbranch beside the fresh-kill pile.

I've hidden the voice from everyone, she thought. *But maybe that was wrong. Maybe my parents could help give me the answers I need.*

Moonpaw raced over to them and halted, panting.

"Moonpaw, whatever is the matter?" her mother, Thriftear, asked, her eyes widening with alarm.

"Has something scared you?" Bayshine added, his fur beginning to bristle as if he was ready to attack anything that had dared to threaten his daughter.

Moonpaw wanted to tell them what had happened, but she could only take in gulps of air, unable to make the right words come.

Thriftear curled her tail around Moonpaw's shoulders and guided her toward a quiet spot around the back of the warriors' den. Bayshine followed, with a word of excuse to Ivypool and Twigbranch.

“Just try to calm down,” Thriftear mewed gently, curling her tail around Moonpaw. “Tell us what’s upsetting you. No cat will hear us here.”

Moonpaw began to feel more secure, drawn close to her mother’s warm fur. Even so, it was hard for her to begin telling what she had kept as a secret for so long. It was only her parents’ patient, loving eyes that encouraged her to find the words.

“I’ve been hearing a voice,” she managed to gasp out at last. “I—I mean in my dreams,” she added, still unable to confess the whole truth, even to her parents, even now when she was so afraid.

“What kind of voice?” Bayshine asked.

“It’s a cat speaking to me,” Moonpaw explained, “and she told me that she and I are one. I’ve seen the cat, too, and she looks like me, but she’s not me.”

Thriftear and Bayshine exchanged a thoughtful glance. There was sadness in their look, but a touch of joy as well. Moonpaw couldn’t understand it at all.

“Was the cat you saw an orange tabby cat?” Bayshine asked.

Moonpaw stared at him. *How could he possibly know?* She gave a scared nod. “Yes, that’s the cat I saw.”

“Then that cat must be your littermate,” Thriftear told her, a quiver in her voice. Bayshine wrapped his tail comfortingly around her shoulders.

“My *what*?” Moonpaw’s heart pounded with shock.

“You were born with a sister,” her mother explained; she was obviously making an effort to keep her voice steady. “She died shortly after she was born; she was never strong enough to live.”

“Jayfeather and Alderheart tried everything they could,” Bayshine added, “and we never left her alone for a single heartbeat. But she couldn’t be saved.”

Moonpaw tried to remember those first days, before her eyes opened. But all that came to mind was the warm, milky smell of the nursery, and her mother’s tongue licking her with long, gentle strokes. She wasn’t aware that there had been another kit beside her.

A pang of grief invaded Moonpaw’s heart. She shouldn’t have been an only kit; she was supposed to have a sister. She remembered how lonely she had felt as a kit, and realized now that it shouldn’t have been that way.

“You never told me!” she exclaimed. She couldn’t keep the note of accusation out of her voice, even though she could see how grief-stricken her parents were.

“I’m sorry we kept it quiet,” Thriftear responded. “We didn’t want to tell you, because we thought it would upset you. You were so young when she died, we didn’t think you would remember. But now it seems that she’s reaching out to you from StarClan through your dreams.” Her voice quivered again, but this time it was with joy. “It might seem scary to you at first, Moonpaw,” she continued, “but I don’t think there’s anything to be afraid of. In fact, it’s actually rather sweet.”

Moonpaw felt as shocked as if a tree had fallen on her. How had her parents—and all her Clanmates—kept such a huge secret from her? Jayfeather and Alderheart had

obviously known. When she'd told them about the voice, had they suspected it had something to do with her littermate? Or were they so tangled up in their memories of Ashfur that the thought had never occurred to them?

And now Moonpaw had managed to anger the sister she had never known existed.

She didn't have the heart to tell her parents what she knew to be true: her sister was not the benevolent spirit they seemed to believe she was. She was willing to hurt a kit, and clearly becoming angrier with Moonpaw for ignoring her. Who knew what she was capable of? Besides, there were no sparkles in her fur, so she had never made it to StarClan. If Moonpaw told Bayshine and Thriftear either of those things, it would only cause them pain, if they believed her at all.

I'm going to have to handle this on my own.

Moonpaw backed away from her parents. "This is so . . . so big," she meowed. "I need to think about it by myself."

Both Thriftear and Bayshine nodded understandingly. "Come back if you have any more questions," Bayshine mewed.

Spinning around, Moonpaw raced across the camp and out through the thorn tunnel before Molewhisker, on guard, could begin to question her. She heard Bayshine call after her, "Be careful out there!"

At first Moonpaw fled aimlessly, dodging through the trees, just wanting to be away from camp. But soon she realized that her running hadn't been so aimless after all. She broke out of the trees and found that she was standing at the top of the slope that led down to the lake.

Moonpaw padded forward until she reached the water's edge. She was afraid to look into the surface, but somehow she knew that she must. Creeping onto a rock that jutted out over the water, she peered over the edge. At first she saw only her own reflection. But soon the surface rippled as if a stone had been cast into it, and when it settled, the face peering back at her belonged to the voice—her sister.

You stopped running, her sister mewed. *Now you know the truth.*

I'm sorry. I didn't know about you, Moonpaw explained. *I'm glad I got to meet you, but you don't belong in this world. You have to go and live your life in StarClan.*

The sister wrinkled her nose. *No. Why would I leave you now?*

Because you're scaring me, Moonpaw confessed. *And you scared Sunkit. You didn't have to mess with him; some cat could have been hurt.*

I needed to convince you that I'm real, the voice responded.

Okay, so you've convinced me. Now you need to leave me alone.

A confused expression formed on her sister's face. *Why would you want to be alone, when you could have me by your side all the time? We can play and have fun. Don't you want to be with me?*

I'm not a kit anymore, Moonpaw told her, reflecting how much she would have loved that when she was a kit. She had often dreamed of having a sister, but not like

this. *I'm an apprentice now. I have responsibilities,* she continued, *and I'm still alive. You need to move on. StarClan is really great; you'll love it there.*

She watched as her sister's face changed from confused to hurt and angry. *You don't understand yet,* she meowed. *I am always with you. We are tied together. And if you won't let me be with you in your world, you will be with me in mine.*

About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the bestselling author of the Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK. Enter the wild at warriorcats.com.

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